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Security gaps seen at U.S. nuke sites

By ERIC HERMAN
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Security at U.S. nuclear weapons sites is so lax that in tests of their defenses, mock terrorists routinely get away with the plutonium, whistleblowers said.

Tales of shaky security, particularly at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, are detailed by former nuclear officials in the current issue of Vanity Fair magazine. The scary assessment was backed up by officials contacted by the Daily News.

"Some of the facilities would fail year after year," said Richard Levernier, in charge of war games for the U.S. government until 2001, when he lost his security clearance.

"In more than 50% of our tests at the Los Alamos facility, we got in, captured the plutonium, got out again, and in some cases didn't fire a shot, because we didn't encounter any guards," Levernier told Vanity Fair.

Los Alamos contains massive amounts of plutonium and highly enriched uranium — key materials for making a nuclear bomb.

One location at Los Alamos, Technical Area 18, is considered especially vulnerable. During a staged attack, Levernier's forces hauled the raw weapons material away in a Home Depot garden cart, according to Vanity Fair.

"At T.A. 18, it's an absolute disas-

ter and it's an embarrassment to the U.S. government," nuclear security expert Peter Stockton told The News.

Stockton, a senior investigator for the Project on Government Oversight, worked for the Energy Department during the Clinton administration. Then-Energy Secretary Bill Richardson ordered weapons-grade material removed from T.A. 18 three years ago but it's still there. Stockton said.

Another whistleblower, Chris Steele, slammed a safety report dealing with a scenario in which a plane crashed into the Radioactive Liquid Waste Treatment Facility at Los Alamos. Though a crash would ignite hundreds of thousands of gallons of nuclear waste, the facility's rooftop sprinkler system would put out the fire, the report said.

"That must be a magical sprinkler system," Steele told Vanity Fair, "since it's apparently able to rise up from the rubble, turn itself on and put out the flames."

The National Nuclear Security Administration said the accusations are outdated.

"The Vanity Fair story cited incidents of failures in security testing in 1996, 1998 and 1999. This is 2003," the agency said. "During the Bush administration, the Department of Energy has increased security funding by more than 50%."