

GAO Questions U.S. Nuclear Security

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The Department of Energy acknowledges that defending U.S. nuclear facilities is a vastly different project than it was before Sept. 11, 2001, but some observers say the department is changing its methods much too slowly.

The threat of organized suicide attackers has turned nuclear security on its ear, Robin Nazzaro, a director at the General Accounting Office, Congress's investigative arm, told a Tuesday hearing of the House Committee on Government Reform.

"In the past we had determined that someone would have to get in and out (of a nuclear facility to do damage), and now we've determined that all they have to do is get in," Nazzaro said.

Department of Energy weapons experts told a 2002 Senate hearing that if terrorists were able to breach a nuclear site containing the proper materials, they might be able to assemble and detonate a 1 kiloton bomb capable of killing thousands in several minutes.

That possibility has precipitated fundamental changes in the way nuclear sites are required to be protected.

A directive issued April 5, 2004, orders sites containing the most dangerous class of nuclear materials to assume a heightened "denial" level of defense designed not only to prevent terrorists from stealing material, but also to keep them from even entering the sites, Danielle Brian, Executive Director of the Project on Government Oversight told the committee.

That directive comes in addition to a new "Design Basis Threat" nuclear security standard that the Department of Energy created after Sept. 11 in response to changing security concerns.

That new standard has attracted controversy, however, and is strongly criticized in a GAO report released Thursday.

The report begins by questioning the two years the Department of Energy took to create the standard after Sept. 11.

"During this extended period, (the department's) sites were only being defended against what was widely recognized as an obsolete terrorist threat level," the GAO report says.

"We certainly said that 2 years is a long time to do this," Nazzaro added.

The report goes on to question the content of the new Design Basis Threat standard,

which Government Reform Committee Chairman Christopher Shays, R-Conn., said some observers think "might be more accurately called the 'Dollar Based Threat,'" since some believe it compromises security to save money.

The GAO report also says the new standard does not pay enough attention to the improvised nuclear bombs the department's weapons experts said terrorists might be able to put together in minutes.

It says the new standard should put more emphasis on the potential for radiological, chemical and biological sabotage as well.

"We're really concerned that (the Department of Energy) is not treating nuclear materials in the way they are treating nuclear weapons," Nazzaro said.

Linton Brooks, the administrator of the energy department's National Nuclear Security Administration disagreed, saying, "We believe that the highest level of defense should be reserved for nuclear weapons."

The GAO report goes on to say that some U.S. nuclear sites will not be able to meet the new standards for up to several years and should be required to put in place additional provisional measures in the meantime.

Both the existence of sites that won't be able to meet the new standards and the implementation of provisional security measures have attracted controversy.

Brian said some nuclear sites were built when security concerns were completely different and will have to be completely rebuilt or abandoned in response to current threats.

"It's simply impossible for these facilities, as they exist, to implement these requirements," Brian said.

Shays said, "Faced with the new security imperative to deny access, not just contain or catch intruders, it should have been immediately obvious (the department) has too many facilities housing nuclear materials, and those facilities are old, above ground, scattered and cluttered World War II-era plant configurations not buffered by adequate setback space."

Consolidating U.S. nuclear materials in more secure sites is a stated Department of Energy goal, but Shays said the department has so far made little progress in that direction.

The department's latest plans to improve nuclear security include moving nuclear material out of one Nevada test site and possibly from further sites, but the efforts have met with continued resistance.

Brian said some of that resistance comes from site operators who fear their importance will diminish when their most dangerous material is gone.

"The people in charge of implementing (the Nevada move) seem to have a different agenda than" Secretary of Energy Spencer Abrahams, who ordered the move, Brian said.

While consolidation and fortification efforts remain incomplete, sites are increasing their use of guards.

That practice, which was widespread after Sept. 11 and continues at sites that are more difficult to protect, worries some observers, who say the additional guarding capacity comes mainly in the form of overtime worked by current employees. Too many hours of overtime, especially for guards expected to remain vigilant, can lead to substandard performance, Brian and others say.

Brooks said his department does face a range of challenges in protecting nuclear sites, but added that he believes all nuclear material in the United States is adequately protected.

"The people looking for soft spots would be ill-advised to come to the facilities for which I am responsible," Brooks said.