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Agency Says 'Dirty Bomb' Could Be Made In Any Country

By SERGE SCHMEMANN

The International Atomic Energy Agency said today that virtually any country in the world had the radioactive materials needed to build a "dirty bomb," and that more than 100 of these countries had inadequate controls to prevent their theft.

The agency, an arm of the United Nations, said in a news release issued at its headquarters in Vienna that "orphaned" radioactive materials -- those outside regulatory control -- were a "widespread phenomenon" in the former Soviet Union.

The agency said that on June 12, some of its officials met with others from the Department of Energy and the Russian Ministry for Atomic Energy to develop a coordinated strategy to locate and secure the orphaned sources.

A dirty bomb is one in which radioactive materials are dispersed through a conventional explosion to spread radioactivity.

Since the terror attacks of Sept. 11, fears have grown that terrorists could deploy a dirty bomb. Earlier this month, the United States announced that an American citizen who had converted to radical Islam had been detained on suspicion of planning to build and detonate such a device.

According to the atomic energy agency, radioactive materials that could be used in a dirty bomb are widely used throughout the world for a variety of purposes, from the treatment of illnesses to irradiating food. Though most are too weak to cause serious radiological harm, the agency said industrial radiography, radiotherapy, industrial irradiators and thermo-electric generators use highly radioactive materials like cobalt 60, strontium 90, cesium 137 and iridium 192.

"What is needed is cradle-to-grave control of powerful radioactive sources to protect them against terrorism or theft," the director-general of the agency, Muhammad el-Baradei, said in the statement. "One of our priorities is to assist states in creating and strengthening national regulatory infrastructures to ensure that these radioactive sources are appropriately regulated and adequately secured at all times."

The agency noted that there has already been one attempt at radiological terror. In 1996, Chechen rebels placed a container of cesium 137 in a Moscow park, but the material was not dispersed.

Though the largest problem was in the former Soviet Union, the agency noted that even the United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission has reported that American companies have lost track of nearly 1,500 radioactive sources since 1996, and more than half were never recovered. A European Union study estimated that about 70 radioactive sources are lost every year from regulatory control. Most of these, however, would not pose a serious threat in a dirty bomb.