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Airports to get dirty-bomb detectors

Jim Bronskill
Canadian Press

Tuesday, December 07, 2004

OTTAWA - Dirty-bomb detectors are being installed at the Ottawa International Airport under a federal project aimed at eventually adding them to air facilities across the country.

The move is intended to stem post-Sept. 11 fears a terrorist will slip a crude radiological device into luggage or onto an airplane.

Officials are particularly worried about the possibility of a dirty bomb packed with conventional explosives such as dynamite to scatter radioactive material stolen from a medical lab or industrial site.

The initial blast could kill or disable bystanders, while fallout may claim more victims and effectively shut down a public facility for weeks.

"The airport itself could be the target of, say, a dirty bomb," said Ted Sykes, a senior project manager.

"Or the airport and aircraft could be used as a means by which to move this stuff from one part of the country to another, or one part of the continent to another."

Fears were heightened last year when documents discovered in Afghanistan suggested Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network may have successfully built a dirty

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bomb.

There is currently "limited capability" at Canadian airports to detect illicit radioactive materials, says a summary of the government project.

The \$4-million pilot effort is part of the federal science community's efforts to improve preparedness for a chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear attack, a program known as the CBRN Research and Technology Initiative, or CRTI.

Project partners include the federal Health and Transport departments, the Ottawa police service, the Ottawa Airport Authority and private firm McFadden Technologies Ltd.

The prototype system will consist of both fixed sensors in the corridors of the Ottawa airport as well as roving detectors inside vehicles that patrol the grounds, said Sykes, a CRTI portfolio manager.

Initially, there will be three or four outfitted cars cruising the airport, with the first in place by the end of the year.

But it's too early for project staff to know how many mobile sensors are needed to cover the Ottawa facility, Sykes said.

"They're going to try to determine, is that the right amount? Do you need more, do you need less?" he said.

"And they'll combine this with the fixed-point sensors to have a system in place that could potentially help detect illicit transportation of material before that turned into a dirty bomb."

The project will use a geographical positioning system, cellular communication and mapping technology to enable staff in a central control room to monitor the various sensor readings.

A colour-coded scheme would help them interpret what each of the detectors is reading, Sykes said.

"Green is good, yellow means there's potentially an issue and red would mean you might have a hot radiological reading by one of the sensors."


The Ottawa pilot should be fully operational by next fall for a one-year testing phase, to wind up in September 2006.

The outcome will help determine the system's future and its potential expansion to other Canadian airports, Sykes added.

The CRTI program already includes a project to install dirty-bomb sensors in as many as 40 RCMP patrol cruisers in the national capital region.

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