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THE CITIZEN

Latest News

Airport gets dirty-bomb detectors

Ottawa pilot project part of \$170-million border defence plan

Vito Pilioci

The Ottawa Citizen; with a file from the Canadian Press

Wednesday, December 08, 2004

The federal government is installing dirty-bomb detectors at the Ottawa International Airport as part of a pilot project that could soon see the devices in airports and cargo shipping docks all across the country.

The project, which could cost as much as \$4 million to implement, is only a small part of a five-year, \$170-million plan to strengthen Canada's border defences against chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.

John Thompson, director of the Toronto-based Mackenzie Institute, an organization that specializes in studying counterterrorism initiatives, says in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, this type of security is "the new reality.

"This is not just for a couple

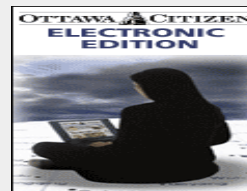


CREDIT: Jean Levac, The Ottawa Citizen

A bomb scare at the Ottawa airport last July stranded travellers and left airport employees waiting outside for hours.

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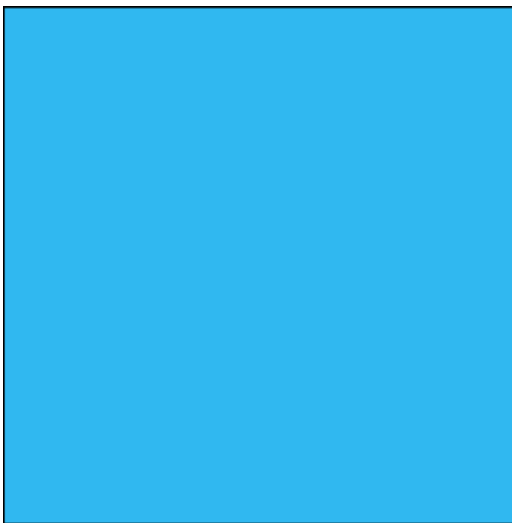
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of years against al-Qaeda," he said. "This is for the foreseeable future, all the time."

Improving security to such threats is the responsibility of the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Research & Technology Initiative (CRTI).

CRTI is a government agency jointly developed by the Department of National Defence and Health Canada.



According to the project summary on the CRTI's website, the CRTI "will implement an operational radiological security system at the Ottawa International Airport which will provide a model transferable for the protection of other airports in the national aviation system."

The summary says that over the course of the next year, radiation sensors developed to target dirty bombs will be selected and deployed in the halls of the airport, as well as in moving vehicles that regularly patrol the airport's grounds.

The sensors will monitor radiation levels in the air and detect if any airline passengers are either carrying radioactive materials or have recently been in contact with such substances.

Similar dirty-bomb detection systems use global-positioning equipment, cellular communications and mapping technology to instantly locate a threat and report the location to a central monitoring area. From there, the proper authorities can be dispatched.

Some time in 2006, the CRTI will take the information it has learned from the Ottawa pilot project and begin to install the technology in other airports and cargo shipping docks across Canada.

No one from the Department of National Defence was available to comment on why Ottawa was chosen for the new initiative last night.

But Mr. Thompson said the government chose Ottawa because of the number of high priority targets, such as the American Embassy, in the area.

"The Americans are especially worried about dirty bombs and we are catching the edge of that," he said. "Especially since al-Qaeda was talking last spring about what they are calling their 'Cave of Darkness' operation. They implied that they had been working on a dirty bomb for some time."

In January 2003, the British Broadcasting Corporation reported that Osama bin Laden's terrorist network had successfully completed the construction of a dirty bomb and warned that such explosive devices may be used in an attack.

Dirty bombs are made by using traditional explosives to spread radioactive materials. The bombs can be as small as a suitcase or backpack or as large as a shipping container, depending on the amount of explosives and radioactive material used to construct the device.

Aside from the initial explosion, people in the vicinity of a detonated dirty bomb can succumb to radiation poison, or be affected by cancer and other diseases caused by the radioactive substances in the bomb. Also, if such a bomb were to explode, it could leave a section of a city uninhabitable for many years.



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According to John Ash, manager of Ottawa's emergency measures unit, no one from the federal government has notified him of the new project at the Ottawa Airport.

However, Mr. Ash said the city has spent more than 18 months drafting a new emergency preparedness blueprint for the nation's capital. One of the situations the city has planned for is disasters such as dirty-bomb attacks.

"We have processes in place to manage such situations," said Mr. Ash. "Terrorist threats have been identified. We would respond with our partners from the provincial and federal government."


The airport initiative is the latest such project the federal government has undertaken to bolster security here.

In October, Transport Canada and the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority introduced high-tech document scanners capable of detecting small amounts of radiation on a person's passport, boarding pass, or any piece of paper they may have on them. The scanners were introduced to catch terrorists who may have been in contact with explosive substances.

Last January, CRTI announced it would equip 40 RCMP patrol cars with dirty bomb detectors. The equipment is similar to what is being installed at the Ottawa Airport and is designed to monitor background radiation and report abnormal levels to a central location.

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