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CRIME: SLOVAK POLICE CONFISCATE 'DIRTY BOMB' MATERIAL

Arrests show bomb market survives

Officials say uranium seizure signals risk of nuclear substances falling into terrorist hands

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Associated Press

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BRATISLAVA -- The arrests of three men who allegedly tried to sell contraband uranium for \$1-million show how a shadowy black market for nuclear components has survived despite tightened security at nuclear facilities worldwide, experts said yesterday.

Slovak police said the material, believed to have originated in the former Soviet Union, was highly dangerous and could have been used in a radiological "dirty bomb" or other terrorist weapon.

United Nations and independent experts suggested the uranium may not have been that lethal. But officials tracking the illicit global trade in radioactive materials said the arrests underscored the risk of nuclear substances falling into terrorist hands.

Should that happen, "the consequences would be so catastrophic, the world would be a different place the next day," said Richard Hoskins, who supervises a database of stolen, missing, smuggled or unauthorized radioactive materials for the International Atomic Energy Agency.

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In 2006 alone, the UN nuclear watchdog registered 252 reported cases, a 385-per-cent increase since 2002.

Mr. Hoskins cautioned that the spike probably was due at least in part to better reporting and improved law-enforcement efforts. Of the 252 cases, about 85 involved thefts or losses, and not all the material was suitable for use in a weapon, he said.

But small amounts can add up, and this week's arrests heightened long-standing concerns that

Eastern Europe is serving as a source of radioactive material for terrorists and criminals.

The suspects, two Hungarians and a Ukrainian who were arrested Wednesday in eastern Slovakia and Hungary, were trying to sell about a pound of uranium in powder form, said first police vice-president Michal Kopcik.

"It was possible to use it in various ways for terrorist attacks," he said.

Mr. Kopcik said investigators believed the uranium was suitable for a "dirty bomb," which would use conventional explosives to spread radioactive material across an urban area.

Corey Hinderstein, director of special projects at the Nuclear Threat Initiative, a Washington-based nuclear non-proliferation advocacy group, said uranium, even if highly enriched, "would not be an effective radioactive dispersal" for a dirty bomb because it is very stable and would not pose a radiation health threat in that form.

Still "people would panic," if such a device were detonated using conventional explosives, she said.

"Is it one pound, or are there lots of one pounds out there?" she said. "If this material is weapons grade, then I'm concerned and we have to answer the question, where did it come from?"