

Opening Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins

**Nuclear Terrorism:
Assessing the Threat to the Homeland**

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
April 2, 2008

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The consequences of a nuclear attack on one of our major cities are nearly unimaginable. If a 10-kiloton nuclear device were detonated at noon in Manhattan's Times Square, half a million lives would be instantly extinguished. All buildings within a half-mile radius would be destroyed. The economic and psychological impacts would also be devastating.

Yet, the threat of terrorists acquiring and using such a weapon is very real. Given their goal of causing as much death and destruction as possible,

Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups continue to seek to acquire and use weapons of mass destruction.

To be sure, our terrorist enemies have many other weapons more readily at their disposal. Improvised explosive devices – the terrorist weapon of choice – have killed thousands and continue to threaten our troops and civilians throughout the world. Chemical weapons, such as Sarin gas, have been directed against such targets as the Tokyo subway system. “Dirty bombs,” using readily available radiological waste, could have serious consequences over a more limited area than a nuclear blast.

Still, the concentrated force of a nuclear explosion, the radioactive contamination of the target and surrounding areas, and the psychological

and economic impact of such an attack place nuclear terrorism in a category all its own. That is why we are holding this hearing to examine closely the scope and nature of this threat.

More than 30 years ago, the Federal Office of Technology Assessment concluded that “a small group of people, none of whom have (sic) ever had access to the classified literature, could possibly design and build a crude nuclear explosive device.” That is, with a machine shop and less than 100 pounds of enriched uranium, terrorists conceivably could assemble an atomic bomb that could deliver about two-thirds the explosive force of the bomb that devastated Hiroshima in 1945.

Of course, even determined and resourceful terrorists face significant challenges in obtaining

fissile material, in assembling a bomb, in transporting it, and in successfully detonating it.

Terrorists could avoid some difficulties by procuring an existing weapon, which is why non-proliferation and nuclear security efforts are so important.

Moreover, our nation has taken many actions to decrease their chances of success even further. We have, for example, installed radiation detection monitors in the nation's 22 largest seaports.

The probability may be low that terrorists could successfully stage a nuclear attack. Indeed, their current plans likely include much less technically demanding options. But a nuclear attack would fulfill Al Qaeda's goal of a "spectacular" attack, and it is a possibility that we ignore at our potential peril.

As one of our witnesses has written, "Nuclear terrorism remains a real and urgent danger."

Our efforts must include robust intelligence initiatives to identify groups that may be planning such attacks and to disrupt their operations before they can succeed. Close interagency cooperation and information sharing with our allies help counter this threat.

We must also plan as effective a response as possible to such a devastating attack. The National Response Framework provides the foundation on which DHS, FEMA, the Department of Defense, and other critical agencies coordinate their resources to deal with the catastrophic consequences of a nuclear attack. We know they would confront overwhelmed or obliterated local response capabilities, mass casualties, evacuations, demands for food and shelter, and so on. This Committee continues to

assess the adequacy of preparation and response capabilities.

Today's witnesses can help us take the measure of the threat. That judgment, in turn, can guide our thinking on the adequacy of the intelligence, diplomatic, technical, and other measures that we use to secure nuclear weapons and fissile materials prevent theft and black-market sales, detect radioactive shipments, penetrate terrorist networks, discourage nuclear proliferation, and otherwise counter the threat.

Today's hearing, as well as those to follow, will help us ensure that our choices are grounded in the best information and analysis that we can muster. I join the Chairman in welcoming our distinguished

**witnesses and thanking them for their contribution
to this important inquiry.**

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