



United States Senate

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Chairman Joseph I. Lieberman, ID-Conn.

Opening Statement for Chairman Joseph Lieberman
“Nuclear Terrorism: Strengthening Our Domestic Defenses, Part I”
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
June 30, 2010

Good morning and welcome. This is the eighth in a series of hearings our committee has held since 2007 to discuss how our nation is confronting the real and dire threats posed by nuclear terrorism. And I must say that, today, it seems to me, as I look back and look at where we are now, that the threat of nuclear terrorist attack on the United States is growing faster than our ability to prevent a nuclear terrorist attack on the United States, on our homeland, and obviously as the homeland security committee this is of great and growing concern for us.

Though most people would prefer not to think about the “unthinkable,” but President Obama, to his credit, has recognized the threat that brings us together this morning. At the 47 nation nuclear summit held in April, the President outlined the dangers here quite clearly, and I quote:

“Nuclear materials that could be sold or stolen and fashioned into a nuclear weapon exist in dozens of nations. Just the smallest amount of plutonium -- about the size of an apple -- could kill and injure hundreds of thousands of innocent people.

“Terrorist networks such as al Qaeda have tried to acquire the material for a nuclear weapon, and if they ever succeeded, they would surely use it,” - these are all continuing quotes from the President.

“Were they to do so, it would be a catastrophe for the world -- causing extraordinary loss of life, and striking a major blow to global peace and stability.

“In short,” - and this is President Obama concluding- “it is increasingly clear that the danger of nuclear terrorism is one of the greatest threats to global security -- to our collective security.”

Then, a month or so later, The “National Security Strategy,” released by the Administration added: “The American people face no greater or more urgent danger than a terrorist attack with a nuclear weapon. . . . Black markets trade in nuclear secrets and materials. Terrorists are determined to buy, build, or steal a nuclear weapon.”

The International Atomic Energy Agency’s Illicit Trafficking Database, which tracks all reported cases of smuggling, theft, unexplained losses or black-market sales of nuclear materials, reports there have been 1,340 confirmed incidents of smuggling since 2007 that involve materials that could at least be used to make a so-called “dirty bomb.”

And of those cases, 18 involved the smuggling of highly enriched uranium or plutonium – the material that is critical to the actual making an atomic weapon.

In 2008, our Committee held hearings to examine the office created in our government to counter this threat – the little-known Domestic Nuclear Detection Office – or DNDO- within the Department of Homeland Security.

At that time, the question was: “How do we keep DNDO on track?”

Today, I ask seriously whether DNDO has been on the right track and moving rapidly enough to achieve its critical mission.

Though most Americans have never heard of DNDO, its mission is clearly vital to our homeland security in the world in which we live in today.

President Bush established the DNDO in 2005 to coordinate and oversee federal efforts to protect the U.S. against the nuclear terrorism. HSPD-14 designated DNDO as the lead organization for domestic nuclear detection, and charged it to work with the Departments of Defense, Energy, and State, and others to develop a GNDA- a global nuclear detection architecture.

Though it has never been defined in statute, the GNDA seems to consist of programs across numerous agencies designed to stop terrorists from getting nuclear materials or weapons, and if they do get them, to stop them from bringing them into the United States, and if they do bring them into the United States, to stop them from successfully detonating them.

DNDO was given the critical job of coming up with an overall plan about how the different departments would work together to implement that plan, and then to recommend what kind of investments in technology would be needed.

This was a big mission that they were given, and in fairness I should say that, and there have been some successes.

For instance, DHS has deployed nearly two thirds of the more than 2,100 radiation portal monitors identified in its deployment plan at established ports of entry on the northern and southern borders.

Today nearly 100 percent of the seaport containerized cargo and 100 percent of vehicle traffic on the southern and northern borders are scanned for nuclear material.

But there also have been omissions and failures, and they're serious.

Cargo coming by rail from Canada or Mexico is still not scanned, only a small percentage of international air cargo is scanned and DNDO apparently has no plans to scan commercial aviation aircraft or baggage.

Five years into its existence, based on its record, it's just inescapable to conclude that DNDO requires retooling, and quickly.

It's made too little progress on its major mission, which is the development of the Global Nuclear Detection Architecture.

Even DNDO seems to have concluded that its approach to this task is fundamentally flawed and now seeks an increase of \$13 million in next year's budget for a new round of studies to produce yet another "overarching strategic plan" over the next several years.

The time for multi-year "studies" is over; the time for urgent action really is now.

We're going to hear today that DNDO has spent hundreds of millions of dollars trying to develop a new radiation detection technology that GAO concludes is only marginally better than we have now.

Known as the Advanced Spectroscopic Portal – or ASP—this program has clearly drained resources from other programs, including development and deployment of mobile, portable or hand-held technologies that could screen other types of in-bound cargo or bulk shipments, like those on international trains and commercial aviation.

I know that the Administration is reexamining DNDO. We hoped that DHS- the Department of Homeland Security- would come and testify today; they said that they weren't ready. We've set down a hearing for July 21st to hear their response from this distinguished group of independent evaluators of DNDO, and I'll say that it's certainly my expectation that what we need to hear from DNDO, from the Department of Homeland Security, is exactly what the intent is to do with and to DNDO to make sure it gets its critical mission right, and quickly.

Sen. Collins?