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NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION

DOE's International Radiological Threat Reduction Program Needs to Focus Future Efforts on Securing the Highest Priority Radiological Sources

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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-07-282, a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, U.S. and international experts raised concerns that unsecured radiological sources, such as strontium-90 and cesium-137, were vulnerable to theft and could be used to make a dirty bomb. In response, DOE established the International Radiological Threat Reduction program to secure high-risk sources in other countries. GAO was asked to (1) assess DOE's progress in helping other countries secure their high-risk sources, (2) identify DOE's current and planned program costs, and (3) describe coordination between DOE and U.S. and international agencies to secure sources in other countries.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making several recommendations to DOE to better prioritize sites to be selected for security upgrades and strengthen program management practices, including developing a long-term sustainability plan to protect DOE's investment in security upgrades. In addition, GAO is asking Congress to consider providing NRC with authority and a direct appropriation to conduct regulatory development activities to help improve other countries' security over sources. DOE said that our recommendations were helpful and would further strengthen its program. NRC said it would work closely with relevant executive branch agencies and IAEA if Congress acts upon our matter for consideration.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-282.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Gene Aloise at (202) 512-3841 or aloisee@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Since 2002, the Department of Energy (DOE) has upgraded the security of hundreds of sites in other countries that contain radiological sources and has achieved noteworthy accomplishments, including removing radioactive material in Chechnya. However, DOE has made limited progress securing many of the most dangerous sources located in waste storage facilities and hundreds of sources across Russia contained in radioisotope thermoelectric generators (RTG). When DOE expanded the program from the former Soviet Union to a global effort, it also expanded the types of sites that required upgrades. As a result, as of September 2006, almost 70 percent of all sites secured were medical facilities, which generally contain one radiological source. Furthermore, DOE has not developed a long-term plan to ensure that security upgrades will be adequately sustained once installed.

From its inception in 2002 through August 31, 2006, DOE spent approximately $108 million to improve the security of sources in other countries. However, funding for the program has steadily declined in recent years, and future funding is uncertain because the agency places a higher priority on securing special nuclear material such as plutonium and highly enriched uranium.

DOE has improved coordination with the Department of State and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to secure sources in other countries. DOE, however, has not always integrated its efforts efficiently. For example, DOE did not transfer $5 million from its fiscal year 2004 appropriation to NRC for strengthening international regulatory controls over radiological sources, despite a Senate Appropriations Committee report directing DOE to do so. In addition, gaps in information sharing between DOE and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have impeded DOE's ability to target the most vulnerable sites in IAEA member states for security improvements.

Recovered RTG Containing Large Amounts of Strontium-90

Source: DOE.