



Highlights of [GAO-07-580T](#), a testimony to the 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 posed a significant security threat to the United States and the international community. If certain types of these sources were obtained by terrorists, they could be used to produce a radiological dispersion device, or dirty bomb. In response, the Department of Energy (DOE) established the International Radiological Threat Reduction Program to identify, recover, and secure vulnerable, high-risk radiological sources.

GAO was asked to (1) assess DOE's progress in securing sources in foreign countries, (2) identify DOE's current and planned program costs, and (3) determine the extent to which DOE has coordinated its efforts with other federal agencies and with international organizations, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In January 2007, GAO issued a report—*Nuclear Nonproliferation: DOE's International Radiological Threat Reduction Program Needs to Focus Future Efforts on Securing the Highest Priority Radiological Sources*, (GAO-07-282)—that addressed these matters.

To carry out its work, GAO reviewed DOE policies, plans and budgets; observed installed physical security upgrades; and interviewed senior DOE, Department of State (State), and Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) officials.
www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-580T.

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

NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION

Focusing on the Highest Priority Radiological Sources Could Improve DOE's Efforts to Secure Sources in Foreign Countries

What GAO Found

While DOE has improved the security of hundreds of sites that contain radiological sources in more than 40 countries, many of the highest-risk sources remain unsecured. For example, more than 700 radioisotope thermoelectric generators (RTG) remain operational or abandoned across Russia, representing the largest unsecured quantity of radioactivity in the world. Each of these devices has activity levels ranging from 25,000 to 250,000 curies of strontium-90—similar to the amount of such material released from the Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident. In addition, only 4 of 20 waste storage facilities in Russia and Ukraine have been secured.

In 2003, when DOE decided to broaden the scope of the program beyond the former Soviet Union, it also expanded the types of sites that required security upgrades to include hospitals and oncology clinics. In contrast to higher priority sources, such as RTGs, these facilities operate teletherapy machines that generally contain a single cobalt-60 source ranging from about 1,000 to 10,000 curies. As of September 30, 2006, almost 70 percent of all sites secured by DOE's program were hospitals and oncology clinics. Moreover, DOE has not developed a plan to ensure that countries receiving security upgrades will be able to sustain them over the long-term.

Since 2002, DOE has spent about \$108 million to implement its program. Funding for the program has steadily declined as DOE has placed a higher priority on securing special nuclear material, such as plutonium and highly enriched uranium.

Finally, although DOE has improved coordination with State and NRC, these efforts have been inconsistent. For example, DOE chose not to transfer \$5 million of its fiscal year 2004 appropriation to NRC for international regulatory activities, causing friction between the agencies. In addition, GAO found that critical gaps in information-sharing between DOE and IAEA have impeded DOE's ability to target the most vulnerable sites in IAEA member states for security improvements.

In its recent report, GAO made recommendations to the Secretary of Energy and the Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration to (1) limit the number of hospitals and clinics containing radiological sources that receive security upgrades to only those deemed the highest risk; (2) accelerate efforts to remove as many RTGs in Russia as practicable; and (3) develop a long-term sustainability plan for security upgrades. In addition, GAO asked 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 GAO's matter for consideration.