

Government warns of nuclear terror threat

Britain faces an increased threat of a terrorist attack involving a chemical, biological or nuclear bomb, a major new government report has warned.

By Duncan Gardham, Security Correspondent
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An increase in the theft and smuggling of dangerous substances means that terrorists are more likely to be able to use weapons such as a dirty bomb, according to the report.

The warning comes in the Government's counter-terrorism strategy document called Contest 2, the most significant redrafting of the Government's fight against violent extremists for six years.

The report warns: "Contemporary terrorist organisations aspire to use chemical, biological, radiological and even nuclear weapons.

"Changing technology and the theft and smuggling of chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and explosive materials make this aspiration more realistic than it may have been in the recent past."

Launching the report, Jacqui Smith, the Home Secretary, said: "Failed states, conflict and technology contribute to our concern about the threat, including what we know about what terrorists want to do and are planning to do."

The report says the risk of a chemical, biological or nuclear attack has been heightened by the pace of technological change and the spread of specialised information and knowledge via the internet.

Its authors point to evidence that al-Qaeda has tried to recruit disaffected nuclear scientists in Pakistan and Iraq and has deployed chemical bombs involving chlorine gas cylinders in Iraq.

The problem has been made worse by the smuggling of nuclear material from the former Soviet Union, where over 1,300 incidents have been reported since 1993.

Gaps have also been identified in the "regulatory regime" at the 2,000 sites authorised to store hazardous and radioactive substances in Britain.

The report says that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have allowed terrorists to develop more sophisticated types of improvised bombs.

"Terrorists have also developed new types of explosives and new ways of using them," the report says. "Technology has developed in conflict areas overseas and is rapidly shared by terrorist organisations around the world."

The Government said it would be training 10,000 police officers to deal with the threat of a chemical, biological or nuclear attack by 2010.

The report also sets out the extent of the wider terror threat facing Britain.

It says Al-Qaeda has lost many experienced individuals, is short of money and is "likely to fragment" the report says but autonomous groups are likely to survive, operating out of fragile or failing states as part of al-Qaeda's "global movement."

"The ideology associated with al-Qaeda will outlive changes to its structure," the report warns, adding: "Terrorist organisations will have access to new technology and may become capable of conducting more lethal operations."

The current threat level remains at "severe" – only one step from the highest level – and the report says: "We know that some British citizens still travel abroad to be trained in how to commit terrorist attacks, that terrorists want to strike the UK again and that they will keep on trying."

In order to counter the threat, the Government plans to spend £3.5bn a year on counter-terrorism by 2011, which goes beyond police and the security services to the 60,000 "store, pub and club managers who all work in crowded places that might be targeted by terrorists."

"We have provided security advice to sport venues and shopping centres and expanded protective programmes for air, sea and rail travel to provide proportionate, sustainable and efficient security for passengers and staff," the report says.

Local government, schools and universities have also been recruited to try and prevent extremism and the report adds: "From experience and

through research we now know more than ever before about how some British citizens are being drawn into terrorism. We are using this understanding with partners to divert people away from this path."

Ms Smith, who said the strategy was the "most comprehensive and wide ranging in the world," also spoke of the need to "strengthen mainstream voices of those that share our values" and to challenge those, such as the recent protesters against troops returning from Afghanistan.

"We the Government and others will say that we think that that's wrong," she said. "Not that they've broken the law. One of the things we're defending in this country is the right to free speech, but that isn't free speech that will go unhindered or unchallenged."

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/politics/lawandorder/5044007/Government-warns-of-nuclear-terror-threat.html>