

Experts Worried About Irradiation Machines

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The U.S. government should replace more than 1,000 irradiation machines used in hospitals and research facilities because terrorists could use the radioactive materials inside them to make "dirty" bombs, a government advisory panel has concluded.

"Any one of these 1,000-plus sources could shut down 25 square kilometers, anywhere in the United States, for 40-plus years," according to the Defense Science Board, a panel of retired military and CIA officials and defense industry experts.

The machines are in relatively unprotected locations such as hospitals and research facilities all over the country, and they may be tempting sources of radioactive materials for terrorists who want to make bombs that can disperse radioactive debris over large areas, rendering them uninhabitable, the board says.

The irradiators contain cesium-137, one of the most dangerous and long-lasting radioactive materials. They are used for radiation therapy and to sterilize blood and food.

Replacing the cesium irradiators with X-ray machines or irradiators that use other materials would cost about \$200 million over five years, but it would take the most accessible sources of dangerous radioactive material inside the United States "off the table" for terrorists, the panel says.

The recommendation is part of an as-yet-unreleased Defense Science Board report that describes how unfriendly nations or terrorist groups could attack the United States with radiological or biological weapons or blackmail the U.S. government with a threat of a nuclear detonation, all while manipulating world opinion against the country in the news media and on the Internet.

The board's report is expected to be released late this year.

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