

Tajikistan's Plutonium Scare

Author: IWPR

Police foil an attempt to smuggle weapons-grade nuclear material for sale in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

The arrest of three men arrested for allegedly trying to smuggle plutonium through Tajikistan has highlighted concerns about the security of the republic's borders.

Officials estimate the black market value of the seized plutonium – a nuclear element produced from uranium and used to make weapons as well as in power stations – at more than 20,000 US dollars.

According to Vladimir Echouprov, a coordinator with Greenpeace's energy department in Moscow, this amount of plutonium is far too small to make a nuclear bomb, but it is more than sufficient to make a so-called dirty bomb, in which radioactive material is spread by conventional explosives. The tiniest amounts used in such a bomb would cause cancers and render the blast area uninhabitable for years.

Defence analysts have long considered Tajikistan to be the weakest link on the long-established smuggling route linking Afghanistan with Russia and western Europe. A recent series of attacks blamed on Islamic extremists has heightened fears that a "dirty bomb" could be constructed using plutonium smuggled through Central Asia.

The DCA say that a man arrested on March 15 – who was identified only as a 50-year-old resident of the city of Fergana in Uzbekistan – has confessed under questioning that he was intending to sell the plutonium to potential buyers in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

The republic's security ministry launched an investigation when two Tajik citizens were arrested two days later on suspicion of aiding the alleged smuggler.

The DCA – a government agency set up in 1999 with the help of the United Nations to tackle drugs trafficking – arrested the man as he travelled from northern Tajikistan to Dushanbe.

Although the arrest was conducted by DCA, those arrested were handed over to the Tajik security ministry, which is responsible for cases such as these. If found guilty, the men face between six and eight years imprisonment.

However, these heavy sentences are unlikely to deter others living in impoverished Tajikistan, where the majority of people live below the poverty line, and salaries are as low as 13 dollars a month. These conditions encourage many residents to try any method of making money, no matter how dangerous or illegal.

Although other Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have a common border with Afghanistan, the route through Tajikistan is considered the most accessible way to get across.

What makes Tajikistan convenient for smugglers in search of buyers in Afghanistan and Pakistan, is that its 1,300 kilometre long frontier is less tightly guarded than that of neighbouring Uzbekistan. While Russian border troops help Tajikistan to protect most of the frontier, the mountainous stretches are particularly porous. Even in the more heavily guarded sections, corruption has made it possible for smugglers to bribe

their way through.

The Turkmen-Afghan border is also porous, but the fact that the republic has isolated itself politically from the other Central Asian nations has meant that movement is restricted.

Although security is tight on the Uzbek-Tajik border – the route taken by the arrested man – observers say the determined smuggler can still find a way through.

This is not the first time that weapons-grade material has been confiscated from would-be smugglers in Tajikistan. However, the plutonium in those cases originated within the republic - a legacy of the uranium mines and enriching factories built by the Soviets but now decommissioned.

This time there seems little doubt that the plutonium came from Russia. According to Major Avaz Yuldashev of the DCA, "The container holding the plutonium had special marking signs which identify it as having been produced at one of Russian nuclear plants."

Vladimir Echouprov, a coordinator with Greenpeace's energy department in Moscow, confirmed that Russia does have factories which produce such containers for plutonium, and told IWPR that the country has several potential sources from which the illicit material could have come.

Weapons-grade plutonium used in warheads and nuclear-powered submarines, and nuclear waste from power plants are mostly processed at the Mayak factory in Chelyabinsk, in the Urals region. There are also a number of military plants where uranium is processed and warheads are produced.

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