Nuclear trafficking

A radioactive subject

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Clamping down on the trade in illicit nuclear materials sometimes offends Russia

A CHANCE, you might think, for Russia to show the co-operation that its president, Vladimir Putin, regularly promises in clamping down on the global traffic in dangerous nuclear materials. Yet the release last week of new titbits about a Georgian sting operation which reportedly netted just short of 80 grams of highly-enriched weapons-useable uranium, a Russian citizen from Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia (a part of Russia) and several Georgian accomplices—was a "provocation", thundered Russia's foreign minister.

The sting was first reported in February last year, and Russia loathes Georgia. But there is more to the Kremlin's nuclear frostiness. While it continues to co-operate with America in securing dangerous nuclear materials around the world—most recently airlifting back to Russia a whopping 286 kilos of highly-enriched uranium fuel from a research reactor in Dresden in former East Germany—Russian officialdom's souring mood at home augurs ill.

Russia is not the only country with a nuclear-smuggling habit. Excluding the Georgian sting operation, a database maintained by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the United Nations nuclear guardian, has clocked 16 confirmed cases worldwide since 1993 where highly-enriched uranium or plutonium (both, in the right form, can be used as the fissile core of a nuclear weapon) has been lost, stolen or seized from would-be traffickers, mostly in Europe and Russia. But not all countries bother to report: China, India and Pakistan have been among the 95 contributors to the list only since last year. Coverage is most patchy in the least secure parts of the world, including Africa and the Middle East.

The Georgian case is alarming. The uranium being hawked was enriched to about 90%, and intended for weapons use (fuel for nuclear-power reactors is typically enriched to 5% or less; most research reactors run

on more highly-enriched stuff, meaning 20% or more). Georgian officials say their prisoner revealed that his bagful came from an as yet undiscovered stash of 2-3kg; not enough for a weapon—that takes up to 25kg—but still a threat.

This case uncannily resembles one in 2003, when 170 grams of similar material was seized on the Georgian-Armenian border; its Armenian smuggler said he had picked it up in Vladikavkaz too, though tests showed the material had originated at a Russian nuclear site in Novosibirsk.

Though the quantities of weapons-grade material seized by police are usually quite small, the consequences of any falling into terrorist hands are huge. Al-Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden, has called the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction a "religious duty". Some experts think building a bomb is beyond the capabilities of such a group; others don't. But a "dirty bomb", made by packing conventional explosives around the nuclear waste and other radioactive materials that make up most of the lost or stolen material reported to the IAEA, would be horribly disruptive.

And reported cases may hardly be the half of it. Those trying to find a buyer are more likely to get caught; those who already have one can avoid police stings.

Nor is al-Qaeda the only potential customer. Chechen rebels who attacked a Moscow theatre in 2002 had first considered an assault on a nuclear research reactor at the nearby Kurchatov Institute. Among other terrorist mischief in Russia, an article in the September 2006 issue of the *Annals of the American Academy* lists the casing of nuclear reactors, monitoring the trains that transport Russia's nuclear weapons and even a plan to hijack a nuclear submarine.

At a summit in Bratislava in 2005, the Russian and American presidents agreed to speed a global effort to secure all dangerous nuclear materials. This included repatriating fresh and spent fuel from the more than 100 nuclear research reactors in 40 countries that Russia and America between them supplied during the cold war. Some of these are being converted to run on less dangerous low-enriched uranium. Meanwhile, America's National Nuclear Security Administration is beefing up reactor security in those ill-governed places where it consists of poorly paid guards and flimsy locks.

Russia's concerns about terrorism are one incentive to fix its nuclear problems. Another is huge dollops of American cash. Since the Soviet Union collapsed, America has helped dismantle thousands of surplus nuclear warheads, consolidate a vast archipelago of nuclear materials, and find jobs for otherwise unemployed Russian weapons scientists.

The window for such co-operation is closing, says Laura Holgate of the Nuclear Threat Initiative, an independent outfit that has paid for the return of some Russian reactor fuel from abroad. Much of the easier work in Russia has been done. But officials there still reject help at their most sensitive nuclear sites, where the bulk of the most dangerous materials are kept. Without America looking over its shoulder, says Ms Holgate, it is unclear that Russia will be so conscientious in maintaining security and prosecuting wrongdoers. And if, as Georgia found, it resents being told its nuclear controls aren't perfect, there won't be much outsiders can do to help anyway.