

Marlboro Pack Sheds Light on Nuclear Smuggling

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WASHINGTON — Early one morning in March, two Armenians slipped aboard a train in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, unaware that they were being watched. They removed a pack of Marlboro Reds hidden in a maintenance box between two cars. Inside the pack, Georgian authorities say, was nuclear bomb-grade uranium, encased in lead.

Before long, Georgian officials seized the uranium and arrested the men, breaking up a ring they say was willing to sell material for nuclear weapons to any bidder. International officials see the operation as one victory in the effort to prevent nuclear weapons from falling into terrorists' hands.

The seizure was reported in April, but few details were disclosed. The Associated Press now has obtained more information from Georgian officials about an operation involving international smugglers and undercover agents. Some elements were confirmed by UN and U.S. officials.

For all its apparent success, the investigation highlighted the difficulty of stopping nuclear

smuggling in the Caucasus. The region has porous borders, widespread corruption and unknown quantities of unsecured materials left over from the Soviet period.

Though this seizure involved, as in previous cases, a small amount of nuclear material, international nuclear safety officials are not reassured. A terrorist organization could accumulate material from numerous small acquisitions over time. And if small amounts can be smuggled and sold, larger batches could follow similar routes.

It also remains unclear whether the small amount of uranium in the cigarette pack was a sample of a larger stash yet to be found.

“The dangerous thing is that there might be more material out there somewhere,” said Archil Pavlenishvili, chief of Georgia’s nuclear smuggling unit in the Interior Ministry. “This proves that if a criminal or an extremist is wealthy enough, it is possible to obtain material.”

Pavlenishvili, who led the team that carried out the operation, provided rare details of the nuclear smuggling underground in an interview with AP. The case appears to demonstrate that an established network of nuclear smugglers is finding more sophisticated ways to evade international controls.

According to the account he and other Georgian officials gave:

The investigation began with a tip from an informant. The man, an ex-smuggler from a village near the Black Sea coast city of Batumi, was once involved in selling fake radiological materials. He told Georgian authorities he had infiltrated a network of smugglers and had learned of an Armenian man trying to sell “serious” nuclear material.

The Armenian, investigators learned, was Sumbat Tonoyan. Once a dairy factory owner, he had lost a fortune gambling and turned to smuggling. Authorities had photos of him taken at border crossings on trips to Turkey.

An undercover agent contacted Tonoyan about the nuclear material, saying only that he was from “a significant organization.” In a meeting in Tbilisi, Tonoyan wanted more information but was told: “It is not your business. I am not asking you your name, please don’t ask mine. If you want to do business, let’s do business.”

Tonoyan first demanded more than \$8 million for 120 grams of uranium — a fraction of the amount needed for a bomb. He did not specify the enrichment level. Uranium has to be highly enriched to be used in a nuclear weapon.

In a second meeting, he came down to about \$1.5 million in U.S. bills. Pavlenishvili says smugglers usually settle below \$10,000 a gram for bomb-grade material. The mere existence of a typical black-market price is a worrisome sign of the supply and demand in the illicit trading of nuclear materials. Tonoyan suggested that he had even more uranium to sell. The buyer was told to expect him in Tbilisi in early March.

Georgian police were skeptical. They have conducted dozens of operations involving smugglers promising nuclear-grade uranium or plutonium. In almost all cases, the criminals turned up with fake material. Still, they responded after being alerted early on March 11 that Tonoyan and a companion had crossed the border in a taxi. The companion was later

identified as Hrant Ohanyan, a retired nuclear physicist from a science institute in Armenia.

Georgian police tailed the taxi. The men got out near a hotel and began casing the deserted street. They appeared concerned they were being watched.

The men then met the train from Yerevan, the Armenian capital, and picked up the cigarette pack containing the uranium. During interrogations, the men would explain they had boarded the train in Yerevan, stashed the uranium and got off before the border crossing.

Authorities had not anticipated the uranium would cross the border separately from the smugglers. So the uranium moved unaccompanied and unsecured for hours until the men picked it up at the station.

Tonoyan switched the meeting place to the hotel he had cased. He met the undercover buyer in a room. When the men pulled out the sample, a radiation detection device hidden on the undercover agent went off. He said a code word. Agents listening in burst in with a commando team.

The uranium was only 18 grams, less than an ounce. But it had been highly enriched, to almost 90 percent, high enough for use in a nuclear weapon. It did not pose a radiological risk to anyone who came upon it in transit.

Georgian officials say Ohanyan and Tonoyan have pleaded guilty after a closed hearing and agreed to cooperate with police. They face at least 10 years in prison. Neither they nor their lawyers were made available to AP.

Radiation detectors on the Georgia-Armenia border under a U.S. program apparently failed to pick up the uranium hidden in the cigarette pack. Pavlenishvili said Ohanyan correctly predicted that the lead casing would conceal the uranium from the detectors. A larger quantity might have been detected.

Georgian and international investigators are trying to determine the origins of the uranium. They have clues. In Ohanyan's pocket, police discovered records of a bank transfer to Garik Dadayan, an Armenian arrested in 2003 for smuggling 180 grams of similar material to Georgia. Dadayan was released by the previous Georgian government. He later was prosecuted in the case in Armenia and sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison. Pavlenishvili said he was released within months of his sentencing.

The two men identified Dadayan as the source of the seized uranium and said he had hinted that there might be more for a second sale. Georgian officials say Dadayan is in Armenian custody and hasn't been cooperating with the investigation.

Armenian Justice Ministry spokesman Lana Mshetsyan confirmed that Dadayan was arrested April 26, 2010, and remains in custody. He is being held in the Kentron prison, a former KGB prison, on charges of smuggling radioactive material.

In an investigation of the 2003 case, Russian authorities provided information that Dadayan had traveled to Georgia from Novosibirsk, Russia, where there is a nuclear fuel manufacturing plant. Several disappearances of material from that plant have been documented.

Georgian officials say they are trying to determine whether the uranium came from the same batch seized in 2003. They say they have sent the material and its packaging to the United States for further forensic analysis and have reported the case to the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Agency spokesman Ayhan Evrensel confirmed that his agency is working with Georgia on the case. A spokesman for the U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration, Damien LaVera, declined to discuss his agency's role in the investigation.

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