

Stopping Nuclear Terrorism

By [William Tobey](#)

October 13, 2013

The  Moscow Times

Earlier this year, an 83-year-old Catholic nun, Sister Megan Rice, was convicted of breaking into the Y-12 National Security Complex near Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where the U.S. stores weapons-grade, highly enriched uranium. Sister Rice and two senior citizen companions cut through three fences before vandalizing the outside of the storage site. Fortunately, they were peace activists and not terrorists bent on causing mayhem, but this appalling lapse proves that no nation can be complacent about securing its nuclear materials.

Six months from now, leaders from around the world will gather at the Nuclear Security Summit 2014 to address the threat of nuclear terrorism. While this may seem like a distant event amid the press of events in Syria, decisions are being made now or in the very near future that will set the agenda for the summit and determine its success.

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In 2011, experts from Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies produced a joint threat assessment on nuclear terrorism. It concludes that the threat of nuclear terrorism is both real and urgent.

Amazingly, one reason why nuclear terrorism remains a credible threat is that we still have not done all that we can to secure stocks of the highly enriched uranium that could be made into weapons. How do we know this, besides the debacle at Y-12? Over the past 20 years, weapons-grade fissile material has repeatedly been seized outside of authorized control, including incidents in Georgia and Moldova in 2003, 2006, 2010 and 2011.

Although none of these cases involved enough material to make a nuclear weapon, they are all gravely serious. First, in many of the cases, the individuals involved claimed that the material was a sample of a larger quantity available for sale. Secondly, the cases constitute physical proof of nuclear security failures.

Simulations and exercises conducted over the past several years by former U.S. and Russian officials reveal that their respective governments are not organized to cooperate effectively on suppressing illegal trafficking of nuclear material or to deal with a nuclear terrorism event.

Jointly, the U.S. and Russia could establish teams that would meet together regularly to share specific steps that they are undertaking to prevent nuclear terrorism and to share best practices. Additional teams could meet to coordinate plans in the event of a real nuclear terrorism plot. Military, intelligence, scientific and diplomatic professionals would plan a response before they faced the hard choices and deadlines of a real crisis. A third set of teams could investigate the past instances of stolen fissile material to discover what went wrong and prevent such failures in the future. Incredibly, this has never been done.

In parallel, the U.S. and Russia could undertake actions to ensure that all of the nuclear weapons, highly enriched uranium and separated plutonium under their control are protected to the highest standards. These include ensuring that professional regulatory oversight and sufficient financial resources are in place to maintain effective security. It also means minimizing the number of facilities that store such stocks and exploring ways to phase out civilian use of highly enriched uranium.

The U.S. and Russia could work with other countries to promote best nuclear security practices. They could draw on their twenty-year experience of working together to secure Russian nuclear stocks and apply that knowledge to helping other countries improve their nuclear security. They could also encourage other nations to recognize the importance of sharing nuclear security practices and appropriately funding the International Atomic

Energy Agency's security efforts.

We have known for years that the threat of nuclear terrorism affects all nations because a detonation anywhere would diminish life and commerce everywhere. Over the past 20 years, the U.S. and Russia have taken many steps to stem proliferation, but those efforts remain insufficient. There are concrete steps that the U.S. and Russia could take — jointly, in parallel and with other nations — to reduce the threat. Now is the time to push for those policies, to ensure that the 2014 Nuclear Security Summit succeeds. The threat of nuclear terrorism is urgent and real; so is the need for action.

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