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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-06-1015, a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Energy (DOE) maintains an emergency response capability to quickly respond to potential nuclear and radiological threats in the United States. This capability has taken on increased significance after the attacks of September 11, 2001, because there is heightened concern that terrorists may try to detonate a nuclear or radiological device in a major U.S. city. This report discusses (1) the capabilities and assets DOE has to prevent and respond to potential nuclear and radiological attacks in the United States, (2) the physical security measures in place at DOE's two key emergency response facilities and whether they are consistent with DOE guidance, and (3) the benefits of using DOE's aerial background radiation surveys to enhance emergency response capabilities.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that (1) DOE review the physical security measures at its two key emergency response facilities to determine whether additional measures should be taken to protect the facilities and (2) DOE and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) evaluate the costs, benefits, and limitations of making greater use of aerial background radiation surveys of U.S. cities. DHS agreed and DOE neither agreed nor disagreed with our recommendations. DOE raised concerns about our finding on security measures.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-1015

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Gene Aloise at (202) 512-3841 or aloise@gao.gov.

COMBATING NUCLEAR TERRORISM

Federal Efforts to Respond to Nuclear and Radiological Threats and to Protect Emergency Response Capabilities Could Be Strengthened

What GAO Found

DOE has unique capabilities and assets to prevent and respond to a nuclear or radiological attack in the United States. These include specialized teams to search for, locate, and deactivate nuclear or radiological devices and to help manage the consequences of a nuclear or radiological attack. These capabilities are primarily found at DOE's two key emergency response facilities—the Remote Sensing Laboratories at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, and Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland.

DOE's two Remote Sensing Laboratories are protected at the lowest level of physical security allowed by DOE guidance because, according to DOE, capabilities and assets to prevent and respond to nuclear and radiological emergencies have been dispersed across the country and are not concentrated at the laboratories. However, we found a number of critical capabilities and assets that exist only at the Remote Sensing Laboratories and whose loss would significantly hamper DOE's ability to quickly prevent and respond to a nuclear or radiological emergency. These capabilities include the most highly trained teams for minimizing the consequences of a nuclear or radiological attack and the only helicopters and planes that can readily help locate nuclear or radiological devices or measure contamination levels after a radiological attack. Because these capabilities and assets have not been fully dispersed, current physical security measures may not be sufficient for protecting the facilities against a terrorist attack.

There are significant benefits to conducting aerial background radiation surveys of U.S. cities. Specifically, the surveys can be used to compare changes in radiation levels to (1) help detect radiological threats in U.S. cities more quickly and (2) measure contamination levels after a radiological attack to assist in and reduce the costs of cleanup efforts. Despite the benefits, only one major city has been surveyed. Neither DOE nor DHS has mission responsibility for conducting these surveys, and there are no plans to conduct additional surveys.

DOE Helicopter Conducting an Aerial Background Radiation Survey



Source: DOE.