

U.S. boosting bioterror response ability

October 5, 2001

UPI Science News

SCOTT R. BURNELL

Witnesses before a House committee Friday said the country's ability to cope with a biological attack has improved since Sept. 11, but more training, equipment and better coordination is needed.

The House Government Reform Subcommittee on Government Efficiency, Financial Management and Intergovernmental Relations held the hearing to gauge U.S. capabilities for dealing with biological or chemical attacks. Committee members, especially Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., were not satisfied with recent reassurances by Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson.

"If anyone can convince me by the end of this hearing that we have the infrastructure in place to react to such an attack and prevent mass carnage, I will be pleasantly surprised," Maloney said. U.S. intelligence officials said the probability of imminent terror attacks was high -- and "100 percent" should military strikes occur against Osama bin Laden and his Afghan protectors, The Washington Post reported Friday. The newspaper, quoting unidentified sources close to congressional intelligence committees, said the assessment was based on intelligence sources in Afghanistan, Pakistan, England and Germany. Elements of bin Laden's al Qaida network were believed involved, but additional details were not made public.

Despite this warning, witnesses said some media reports have exaggerated the threat U.S. citizens face. Amy Smithson, director of the Chemical and Biological Weapons Nonproliferation Project at the Henry L. Stimson Center in Washington, said rumors about crop dusters possibly delivering biological agents cannot be substantiated.

"Having spent quite some time with people who fly these aircraft, they assure me this is not as easily done as is portrayed today," Smithson said. Microbes such as anthrax are too small to disperse properly from a cropdusting system, she said.

Responding to questions from Rep. Janice Schakowsky, D-Ill., Smithson said such planes could spray chemical agents, but the heights at which a cropduster would have to fly over an urban area would dilute the chemical's potency.

People buying gas masks and stockpiling antibiotics in response to media reports are overreacting, Smithson said. They also could be giving themselves a false sense of security, she said, since training and technical know-how are necessary for using such items properly. Smithson said such activities can be stopped by giving the public more accurate, official

information.

Smithson also pointed out the difficulties in manufacturing such weapons. The Aum Shinrikyo cult, which killed dozens of Tokyo residents with the nerve gas sarin in 1995, used very large budgets and skilled technical staffs to create a biological weapon, but failed. The cult could not even create as much sarin as they had hoped, Smithson said.

Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley told the committee the city's experience during this summer's train wreck and chemical spill helped improve Baltimore's response plans. In particular, the city has created a computer network among area hospitals, he said, forming an early warning system to detect widespread symptoms of biological or chemical attacks.

Lt. Gen. James Peake, the Army's surgeon general, told the committee military health facilities are increasing their laboratory capability to detect and diagnose chemical and biological agents. The Army's labs also are networking with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta to increase the nation's overall testing capabilities, he said.

There are, however, a great many things the federal government can do to further enhance U.S. capabilities, witnesses said. Many said more federal funding needs to reach local emergency agencies, both for training and the equipment needed to deal with an incident. O'Malley said public access to the nation's rail system needs to be limited, since trains regularly carry hazardous cargo.

Baltimore Police Commissioner Edward Norris said the FBI, CIA and other agencies would have a huge ally in local police forces if they simply would share more information about ongoing terrorist-related investigations.

"The FBI has a total of 11,533 agents. There are nearly 650,000 local law enforcement officers in this country," Norris told the committee. "We have to know more about what there is to look for in our own communities so we can better protect our own people and be more effective gatherers of intelligence for the FBI."