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Lawmakers Announce Legislation to Reduce Nuclear Threat

With reports that a top leader of Al Qaeda has told American officials that terrorists are close to constructing a crude nuclear device to be used against the U.S., Representatives Ellen Tauscher (D-CA) and John Spratt (D-SC) announced their intention today to introduce the Nuclear Threat Reduction Act of 2002 (NTRA) to strengthen U.S.-Russian efforts to reduce the nuclear threat.

“The threat of weapons of mass destruction falling into the hands of terrorists who wish to do the U.S. harm is real,” said Rep. Tauscher. “It is imperative that our government work with Russia to ensure that we are doing everything in our power to secure both our nations’ weapons of mass destruction.”

“There is no doubt that U.S. security is tied to the security of Russia’s nuclear arsenal,” said Rep. Spratt. “This legislation will take important steps forward to expand and strengthen non-proliferation programs in the U.S. and Russia and ensure our homeland is truly secure.”

Specifically, NTRA calls for:

Expanded Accountability and Inventory of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the U.S. and Russia

A recent CIA report faulted the security at Russian nuclear arsenal facilities stating that “undetected smuggling has occurred.” Recognizing the shortcomings in the Russian system for accounting for nuclear warheads and weapons-grade material, the U.S. will assist Russia in establishing comprehensive inventories and data exchanges of Russian and U.S. nuclear, chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction with particular attention to tactical warheads – one of the most likely weapons a terrorist organization or state would acquire – and also on weapons which have been removed from deployment.

Expanded Non-Proliferation Funding/Strengthening Homeland Security

Outside of the U.S., Russia possesses over 95% of the world’s nuclear weapons and material. There are more than 20,000 Russian weapons scientists who have knowledge that could aid terrorists seeking to develop weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, the Russians have produced thousands of tons of the viruses that could lead to a serious bioterrorism threat.

NTRA would increase funding for non-proliferation programs with Russia and help find peaceful employment for Russian scientists and terrorists.

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Cooperative Threat Reduction Waiver Authority

In a supplemental appropriations request to Congress, President Bush asked for the authority to expedite funding to reduce and prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and materials for national security purposes. Recognizing that an essential priority of the United States is to reduce and prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, materials, and expertise, this bill allows the President to waive certification requirements previously placed on the Cooperative Threat Reduction program if he judges this to be in the national security interest of the United States. This waiver will ensure that these programs may be implemented unencumbered and efficiently. NTRA supports the President's request.

Nuclear Posture Review Clarification

NTRA supports the President's objective outlined at the Bush-Putin Summit last November and echoed in the Nuclear Posture Review to achieve a level of 1,700-2,000 operationally deployed warheads. NTRA calls upon the President to report back to Congress progress on:

- the number of operationally deployed nuclear weapons
- the number of nuclear weapons in the responsive force
- the number of active and inactive nuclear weapons in the reserve force
- the number of weapons slated for dismantlement.

NTRA also calls for a report from the President to Congress on how the full implementation of cuts announced by President Bush at the November 2001 Summit and outlined in the Nuclear Posture Review could be accomplished by 2006, 2008, or 2010, as compared to the current timeline of 2012.

Nuclear Testing

The U.S. has voluntarily refrained from conducting underground nuclear tests since 1992. This moratorium has helped dissuade Russia and China from testing. NTRA supports the continued moratorium, but states that if the President determines that the national security interests of the U.S. require conducting an underground nuclear test, he would be required to notify Congress no less than 18 months prior to the intended date of the test.

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