



COMMISSION ON THE PREVENTION OF WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION PROLIFERATION AND TERRORISM

Contact: Melanie Pipkin
202-350-6653

WMD Commission Holds NYC Hearing; Threat Still “Very Real”

NEW YORK, Sept. 11, 2008 – The Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism (WMD) held its first public hearing in New York City yesterday, drawing experts from the field of nuclear and biological terrorism to testify on the present WMD threat to the United States. Witnesses included New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg; former NBC anchor Tom Brokaw who received an anthrax letter in 2001; former Senator Sam Nunn; New York City Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly; and Los Angeles Police Chief William Bratton, among others.

Chairman Bob Graham opened the hearing by outlining the Commission’s forward-looking focus on nuclear and biological terrorism. “We need an unvarnished assessment of the risks posed by WMD proliferation and terrorism and what more our government must do to counter the threat of nuclear and biological terror attacks.”

Former U.S. Senator Jim Talent, WMD Commission co-chair, addressed the unique scientific and technological advancements that increase the challenges facing the nation in countering WMD proliferation and terrorism.

“The same development that has fostered globalization and economic growth, opportunity and independence can also be leveraged against us by our enemies – including the terrorists seeking to acquire and use weapons of mass destruction,” Talent said.

“Our adversaries are entrepreneurial, making use of the Internet, porous borders an easy access to once closely-held information. The question for this Commission – and for the next Administration and Congress – how do we stop them?” he said.

Mayor Bloomberg testified that New York City is still vulnerable to a WMD attack. “I’m glad to see that Congress has focused this commission on prevention – because Congress itself has lost that focus,” Bloomberg said. “The people we send to Washington have been too busy spreading homeland security funds around based on votes, not threats. And that is a very dangerous thing for our country.”

Tom Brokaw described how in 2001, two members of his NBC News staff became infected with cutaneous anthrax after handling a contaminated letter addressed to him. During the anthrax letter attacks, he noted, no reliable medical information on cutaneous anthrax was available from official federal government sources



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Brokaw noted that, seven years after receiving his letters, he searched the Department of Homeland Security Web site and was still unable to find readily available and comprehensive information on biological and other WMD threats.

Brokaw also revealed, for the first time in public, that during the anthrax letter attacks, he established a "back channel" to the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) at Fort Detrick, Maryland, and sent biopsy specimens of the skin rash developed by his assistant. USAMRIID misdiagnosed the rash, reporting that the cause of the skin lesion was not anthrax but the bite of a brown recluse spider.

According to Dr. Margaret Hamburg, another witness and former Commissioner of Health of New York City, "Unlike nuclear weapons, biological weapons are relatively inexpensive and easy to acquire." She warned that due to advances in bioscience, it has become possible to produce novel biological agents that have been "engineered to be resistant to antibiotics or to evade the immune system."

Regarding the nuclear threat, former Senator and current Co-Chair and CEO of the Nuclear Threat Initiative Sam Nunn testified that, "The threat of a nuclear attack is a real and present danger, and yet we are doing an insufficient job in defending against this new threat." Dr. Matthew Bunn of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government agreed, saying that nuclear terrorism is a very real possibility.

New York City Police Commissioner Kelly, Los Angeles Police Chief Bratton, and FBI Deputy Director John Pistole all agreed that information sharing and cooperation is much better now than it was before 9/11, while acknowledging that some challenges remain.

"We need the federal government to step up and address vulnerabilities that put the public at risk," Commissioner Kelly said. "Whether it's fixing gaping roles in regulation, securing loose nuclear materials abroad, or fully funding programs here at home that represent our last line of defense, we have absolutely no time to lose. We must do everything in our power to stop them before it's too late."

Carrie Lemack, co-founder of the nonprofit "Families of September 11, also testified. The Commission will hold its second hearing on October 1 in Washington, DC.

Established by House Resolution 1 to implement a key recommendation of the 9/11 Commission, the Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism is charged with assessing current activities, initiatives, and programs of the United States to prevent weapons of mass destruction proliferation and terrorism. The Commission will make concrete recommendations to improve such activities and plans to issue its final report this fall.

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Hearing statements and background are available on the Commission's Web site:
www.preventwmd.org.