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Gone Missing

Ever since Sept. 11, 2001, the world has shuddered at the possibility of loose nuclear weapons or radioactive material falling into the hands of terrorists. Shuddered and done too little to stop it.

Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, warned last week that there has been a “disturbingly high” number of reports of missing or illegally trafficked nuclear material. According to agency figures, there were 243 incidents between June 2007 and June of this year. Fortunately, the amounts reported missing have been small. Some experts say that if all the material were lumped together it would not be enough for one nuclear weapon. That is no consolation in a world where so many countries are eager to build their own nuclear reactors and possibly nuclear weapons.

That means that in coming years there will be even more states with nuclear materials, more scientists with nuclear knowledge and more opportunities for terrorists to get their hands on the material for a bomb.

It is the atomic agency’s job to keep tabs on civilian nuclear programs, to ensure that states do not misplace fuel or divert it to clandestine weapons programs. One way to guard against such a perilous future is to ensure that the agency is fully staffed with the best people available and has the money and support it needs.

Member states must be willing to increase their budget contributions so the agency can refurbish its testing laboratory, invest in new technology and hire additional nuclear experts. The agency must also be ready to take on new tasks, like administering a nuclear fuel bank to be the supplier of last resort for countries that choose not to get into the risky reactor fuel business. (Producing nuclear fuel is the hardest part of building a nuclear weapon.)

Mr. ElBaradei completes his term at the end of 2009. His successor must be knowledgeable, politically skilled — but less likely to give Iran the benefit of the doubt at crucial moments — and ready to help lead a global campaign to secure dangerous nuclear materials and constrain the world’s nuclear appetites.

President Bush spent far too much energy trying to oust Mr. ElBaradei and far too little on arms reduction and restraining the spread of nuclear technology and know-how. Barack Obama and John McCain both say they understand the many threats out there. We hope they also see the urgency.

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