COMBATING NUCLEAR TERRORISM

Federal Efforts to Respond to Nuclear and Radiological Threats and to Protect Key Emergency Response Facilities 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. One of these unique capabilities is the ability to conduct aerial background radiation surveys. These 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. DOE and DHS disagree about which department is responsible for informing cities about the surveys, and funding and conducting surveys if cities request them. In the absence of clear mission responsibility, DOE and DHS have not informed cities about the surveys and have not conducted any additional surveys.

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 than 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.