



HOMELAND SECURITY COMMITTEE

Statement of Subcommittee Chairman Dan Donovan (R-NY) Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response and Communications

“Examining the Department of Homeland Security’s Efforts to Counter Weapons of Mass Destruction”

December 7, 2017

Remarks as Prepared

The Department of Homeland Security was created in response to the September 11th terrorist attacks and the threats to the homeland posed by Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Since that time, the scope of the threat has changed dramatically – it has become much more diverse and diffuse. We know that terrorist groups have long strived to employ chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear materials in their attacks.

There have been documented reports of ISIS using mustard gas in Syria as well as Sarin and chlorine gas use by the Syrian government. A plot to release hydrogen sulfide via an improvised chemical dispersion device was uncovered by Australian police. Kim Jung-Un had his step-brother assassinated using VX nerve agent.

A laptop reportedly retrieved from an ISIS hideout in Syria in 2014 contained plans for weaponizing bubonic plague and a document discussing the advantages of using biological weapons. The rapid evolution of new biological techniques, such as CRISPR CAS-9 (pronounced crisper-cass-nine), pose potential threats, as the new techniques can be used for good or evil.

North Korea, a state sponsor of terrorism, continues its nuclear tests and has expanded its missile program to such an extent that General Mattis has indicated that they now have the range to reach the United States. The North Korean Central News Agency stated that the ICBM can carry a “super-large heavy warhead, which is capable of striking the whole mainland of the U.S.”

And this is the context under which we meet today. As the world of threats becomes more complex, it is incumbent upon the Department of Homeland Security to assess whether or not it is optimally organized to best confront the variety of threats it is expected to counter.

Acting Secretary Duke determined that the Department is, in fact, not currently organized to best address these threats. As a result, on October 6th, she notified the Committee of her intent to use her “872” reorganization authority to establish a “Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction,” or “CWMD” Office, headed by an Assistant Secretary for CWMD. This reorganization took effect earlier this week and I am pleased that we are joined today by the Assistant Secretary and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for CWMD, along with the Acting Under Secretary for Science and Technology, to discuss this new office.

I will note that Acting Secretary Duke realized that the use of her 872 authority will only take her so far and legislative changes are necessary to fully integrate the CWMD Office.

This Committee stands ready to work with the Department on this authorization, as we worked with the Obama Administration on their proposal to establish a similar office.

Last Congress, the House passed the Department of Homeland Security CBRNE (pronounced Sea-Burr-Knee) Defense Act, authored by Chairman McCaul. Based on the Obama Administration's proposal, the structure of the office created by the CBRNE Defense Act differs from the CWMD Office envisioned in the Department's current proposal.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses how the current threat stream informed their proposal and how the organizational structure envisioned in the proposal will set DHS up for success in meeting its vital mission.

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