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NYC Vets Radiological Strike Prevention Measures

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Police officers from New York City and neighboring areas are vetting the region's readiness to detect and eliminate radiological "dirty bomb" threats in a five-day drill this week, the Associated Press reported (see [GSN](#), March 14).

The exercise, which authorities said "involves thefts of radiological material by four separate cells of a fictional terrorist group intent on targeting New York City with a dirty bomb," is being conducted under the federal Securing the Cities initiative (see [GSN](#), April 5). More than 100 police and other government entities in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut participate in the New York Police Department-headed program, which was launched several years ago to safeguard the city against nuclear and radiological terror threats.

A sweep of the city and surrounding jurisdictions by hundreds of police earlier this week netted mock equipment and pilfered components at a Connecticut car dealership, in a vehicle close to Yankee Stadium, and on the persons of three drill participants at New York City's Penn Station.

As part of Thursday's portion of the drill, rapid-response boats operated by New York City police and the state's Naval Militia intercepted a small fishing vessel releasing gamma rays that suggested the presence of a dirty bomb. Officers boarded the suspicious boat and scanned it with additional equipment, and the measurements were relayed to a central police office and to federal analysts in Washington who aided in assessing whether the vessel was "hostile."

"It's all about stopping the bad guys and weapons from getting into the city," said Capt. Michael Riggio, an NYPD Counterterrorism Division coordinator.

In the drill's scenario, police had been informed of a theft of medical cobalt and cesium, radioactive materials suitable for dispersal using conventional explosives, Riggio said. Sixty-seven vessels in the Hudson River, New York Harbor and other waterways scanned boats weighing less than 300 tons for signs of radiological weapons (see related [GSN](#) story, today).

Dozens of NYPD cruisers were set to deploy on Friday around the United Nations complex and the two terminals of the Staten Island Ferry.

The five days of drills were geared toward examining the administration and execution of counterterrorism responses in the United States. The Securing the Cities a program has received tens of millions of dollars in federal support, in part for the assessment of tools and practices that might be put to use in other parts of the nation. New York City has also long been considered a likely site for future terrorism strikes, a belief buttressed by the thwarted 2010 Times Square bombing attempt (see [GSN](#), Oct. 5, 2010).

Emergency workers must participate in frequent exercises involving mock weapons for such preparations to be effective, security specialists said.

"That's what these exercises are all about -- so you can be better prepared to respond when there's an actual event," former NYPD Commissioner and Los Angeles police head William Bratton said. "You need to identify what works and what doesn't work."

Skeptics, though, have suggested the burden imposed by such exercises might be disproportionate to their benefit.

The Security the Cities project has fielded thousands of radiation detectors within and around New York City. The program depends too greatly on reports to police of an impending radiological threat, skimming over the possibility that extremists could obtain potential weapon ingredients from a lawful operation within the city, said Randall Larsen, a former Air Force colonel who leads the independent Institute for Homeland Security.

"It's fine to do all the lights-and-sirens exercises," Larsen said. "But that doesn't address what to do once a dirty bomb goes off. No one wants to do that exercise" (Tom Hays, Associated Press/[NBC News](#), April 8).