

UN: Threat of a hacking attack on nuclear plants is growing

December 15 2016, by Edith M. Lederer

The "nightmare scenario" is rising for a hacking attack on a nuclear power plant's computer system that causes the uncontrolled release of radiation, the United Nations' deputy chief warned Thursday.

Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson told a Security Council meeting that extremists and "vicious non-state groups" are actively seeking weapons of mass destruction "and these weapons are increasingly accessible."

Non-state actors can already create mass disruption using cyber technologies—and hacking a nuclear plant would be a "nightmare scenario," he said.

The open council meeting focused on ways to stop the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons by extremist groups and criminals. Members unanimously approved a resolution to strengthen the work of the council committee monitoring what countries are doing to prevent "non-state actors" from acquiring or using weapons of mass destruction, known as WMDs.

Eliasson said there are legitimate concerns about the security of stockpiles of radioactive material suitable for making nuclear weapons but that are outside international regulation.

In addition, he said, "scientific advances have lowered barriers to the production of biological weapons."

"And emerging technologies, such as 3D printing and unmanned aerial vehicles, are adding to threats of an attack using a WMD," Eliasson said.

He said the international community needs robust defenses to stay ahead of this technological curve. "Preventing a WMD attack by a non-state actor will be a long-term challenge that requires long-term responses," Eliasson said.

U.N. disarmament chief Kim Won-soo said the new resolution recognizes "the growing threats and risks associated with biological weapons" and the need for the 193 U.N. member states, international groups and regional organizations to step-up information sharing on these threats and risks.

Kim said it is important that the Security Council keep up its focus on preventing deadly weapons from getting into the hands of extremists and criminals, but it also needs to study how to respond if prevention fails.

"The consequences of an attack would be disastrous and we must be prepared," he said.

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