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LEGISLATION NEEDED TO REQUIRE NATIONAL GUARD AND RESERVES TO STEP UP CIVIL SUPPORT DURING DOMESTIC CATASTROPHES

WASHINGTON – Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Chairman Joe Lieberman, ID-Conn., and Ranking Member Susan Collins, R-Me., said Wednesday they would move to require the National Guard and Reserves to be equipped, trained, and ready to respond to a homeland security catastrophe, particularly a nuclear attack.

At the kick-off hearing to the Committee's inquiry into the preparedness of the federal government to prevent, respond to, and recover from a nuclear terrorist attack, the Senators said they would begin working on legislation to ensure full support from the Department of Defense during an overwhelming domestic crisis and to clarify who would be in charge.

“The challenges of response to a nuclear or biological attack where only the Department of Defense has the medical assets, the logistical capability, and the sheer manpower needed to respond would be immense,” Lieberman said. “The key players—the National Guard Bureau, Northern Command, the Department

of Homeland Security, other federal agencies, and the States and localities—must be integrated seamlessly in order to be ready to respond effectively. Are we as ready as we should be? The Commission says no, and I find its answer to be convincing. That gives us the responsibility together to fix that.”

Collins said, “Defeating threats to the nation will always be the military’s first mission. But the breadth of our military’s skills and its deployment across the nation require that we ensure that America’s military is prepared to effectively augment civilian responses when catastrophe strikes in the homeland.”

Today’s hearing, entitled “The Defense Department’s Role In Homeland Security: How the Military Can and Should Contribute,” focused on seven Commission recommendations related to homeland security, including the recommendation that DoD make its civil support mission equal in priority to its war-fighting missions and that National Guard and Reserve forces play a lead in providing civil support..

The Commission report, made public last month, concluded the federal government is not adequately prepared to respond to a WMD attack on our homeland.

The National Intelligence Estimate of July 2007 warned that “al-Qa’ida will continue to try to acquire and employ chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear material in attacks and would not hesitate to use them if it develops what it deems is sufficient capability.”

Further, International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohamed El Baradei reinforced the specific threat of nuclear terrorism when he said: “This, to me, is the most danger we are facing today. Because any country, even if they have nuclear weapons, would continue to have a rational approach. They know if they use a nuclear weapon, they will be pulverized. For an extremist group, there is no concept of deterrence. If they have it, they will use it.”

El Baradei added that the IAEA handles about 150 cases a year involving trafficking of nuclear material and that some material reported stolen is never recovered. Furthermore, he said, “a lot of the material recovered has never been reported stolen.”

Hurricane Katrina showed how important a coordinated military response is to a disaster. DoD committed more than 20 naval vessels, almost 300 helicopters, and 70,000 troops, including 50,000 National Guard troops, deployed to the Gulf Coast in the ten days following the storm.

“The best response to the threat of nuclear terrorism is, of course, to stop terrorists from getting and using weapons of mass destruction, and that is what our intelligence and military forces are focused on,” Lieberman said. “But, we cannot guarantee that our efforts to prevent terrorists from acquiring and using nuclear weapons in America will always succeed.”

Witnesses included Commission Chairman, retired Marine Major General Arnold L. Punaro, and two of his fellow commissioners, retired Air Force Lieutenant General James E. Sherrard III and retired Army National Guard Major General E. Gordon Stump.

-30-