Nuclear security summits held in 2010 and this year have achieved a great deal by focusing world leaders’ attention on the issue of securing nuclear materials, but there are ways to preserve much of that focus once the series of summits ends, a senior U.S. nuclear policy official said last month.

Speaking Nov. 5 in Arlington, Va., Laura Holgate, senior director for weapons of mass destruction terrorism and threat reduction at the National Security Council, said a main U.S. goal is to “leave behind a strengthened web of treaties, institutions, norms, and practices that will reliably secure nuclear materials.” She emphasized the roles of international organizations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and of national regulatory bodies.

The first nuclear security summit, which sprang from a commitment President Barack Obama made in his April 2009 Prague speech on nuclear weapons policy, took place in Washington in April 2010. The second one was in Seoul last March.

Officials from the United States and other countries have made it clear that the biennial summits will not continue indefinitely and have raised the possibility that the next summit, scheduled for 2014 in the Netherlands, will be the last. (See ACT, November 2011.)

In comments earlier this year on the question of how long the summits would continue, Holgate said the benefits of “leader engagement” would have to be weighed against the possibility of “leader fatigue.”

In her Nov. 5 remarks, Holgate said one of the main U.S. goals for the summits has been “the personal engagement of leaders on an issue where they owe their citizens their highest commitment.” In describing the Seoul summit, she said the leaders were “focused, on-point, and highlighting tangible progress over platitudes and generalities.”

Asked how to maintain high-level attention to nuclear security after the summits end, Holgate said one step is to “raise the capability and the profile and the durability” of existing institutions.

She pointed to a conference that the IAEA is planning to hold in Vienna, where the agency is based, next July 1-5 on nuclear security. Holgate said there is talk of holding the meeting every three years and having one day of the week-long event include ministerial-level participants. “We’ll certainly use our voice in Vienna to promote that,” she said.

According to the IAEA’s meeting announcement, one purpose of the conference will be to help the agency prepare its next Nuclear Security Plan, which would cover the years 2014-2017. The target audience includes “senior government officials” and other “high-level” participants from all of the areas and agencies involved in making policy for and managing nuclear security,” the announcement said.

In a Nov. 14 interview, a Vienna-based diplomat said planning for the July meeting is in the relatively early stages and that issues such as the exact level of the participation are “still to be determined.”

**Stronger IAEA Role**
Andrew Semmel, a deputy assistant secretary of state for nuclear nonproliferation under President George W. Bush, said in a Nov. 19 interview that the IAEA could play a major role in establishing a global framework for nuclear security. He said the 2014 summit could “set into motion” a process toward agreement on such a framework, which would set security standards, outline monitoring mechanisms, and provide states with the assistance needed to implement the framework’s provisions.

Semmel, now an independent consultant whose clients include the IAEA, said the agency is the “logical mechanism” to implement this framework agreement, which he said should lead to a legally binding treaty.

U.S. officials have said they do not think the effort to strengthen nuclear security around the world requires additional legal instruments.

Semmel, who also was a panelist at the Nov. 5 meeting, acknowledged in the interview that getting the “buy-in” from states for moving toward binding standards would be difficult, and he identified steps short of a treaty that could be taken at the 2014 summit to strengthen the IAEA. Specifically, he said that the IAEA needs “more authority and resources.”

The nuclear security system would be enhanced if the IAEA had a mandate for peer reviews that required states to fix any reported deficiencies, he said. The lack of such a mandate is the “single biggest obstacle” impeding the IAEA’s ability to strengthen nuclear security, he said. Under the current system, states request various services, including peer reviews or assistance from the IAEA, but are not obligated to follow through on the agency’s recommendations.

Semmel also said that the 2014 summit should encourage states to budget more resources “without earmarks” for the IAEA Nuclear Security Fund, which is mostly funded by voluntary contributions.

The idea of shifting responsibility for nuclear security from the summit process to the IAEA also has drawn support from other quarters. In a Nov. 16 interview, an official from an Arab country that participated in the Washington and Seoul meetings expressed concern that continuing the summit process would lead to the development of nuclear security standards that impede “access to nuclear technology.” The process should be handed over to the IAEA after the 2014 summit because the agency has “more universal representation,” he said.

The Vienna-based diplomat said that although there has been “some discussion” of giving the IAEA major responsibility for sustaining global efforts on nuclear security, the agency is “a long way from any formal decisions” on that topic.

The Arab official said his country would like to see a greater emphasis at the 2014 summit on securing high-intensity radiological sources. Too narrow a focus on fissile material makes the summit “less relevant” to many participating states, he said. Radiological source security was added to the agenda for the 2012 summit, but participating officials have said it did not receive much attention in Seoul.

Other Institutions

In addition to the IAEA, Holgate cited the United Nations and Interpol, through its Radiological and Nuclear Terrorism Prevention Unit, as other organizations that could help maintain a global focus on nuclear security. Those three organizations, as well as the European Union, sent representatives to the Seoul summit. Holgate also highlighted the role of “informal institutions” such as the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism and the Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction.

Another key part of keeping nuclear security as a high priority is the work of national regulatory agencies, she said. Holgate pointed to a planned Dec. 4-6 conference in Rockville, Md., on nuclear security for regulators from around the world, as part of the U.S. effort to raise the profile of that aspect of the issue. She noted that John Brennan, Obama’s chief aide on homeland security and
counterterrorism, is scheduled to be one of the keynote speakers.

Brennan’s participation is “intended to signal the level of seriousness” that the United States is putting into an event that otherwise could be seen as “kind of a parochial, trade-level, or lower-level engagement,” she said. IAEA Director-General Yukiya Amano also is scheduled to deliver a keynote address to the conference.

“If we can find another country to host a second and a third and a fourth of those regulatory conferences, I think that will contribute strongly to the implementation and durability of security around the world,” Holgate said.

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