

Smugglers Arrested in Moldova

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[By Kelsey Davenport](#)

Three men were arrested in Moldova earlier this year for attempting to sell radioactive materials to an undercover police officer posing as a middleman for the Islamic State group, according to an Associated Press story published last month.

According to the Oct. 6 story, a joint operation involving the Moldovan police and the FBI led to the arrest in February, after the alleged smugglers gave the undercover officer cesium in exchange for money.

Certain types of cesium could be used in a so-called dirty bomb, which combines conventional explosives with radioactive sources to spread contamination.

State Department spokesman John Kirby confirmed the operation during an Oct. 7 press briefing and said the continued smuggling of radioactive material has “grave consequences.”

According to the [AP article](#), the seller claimed to have enough cesium-137 for a dirty bomb and wanted to sell it to the Islamic State for the purpose of bombing U.S. citizens.

Three smugglers were arrested after selling cesium-135 to the Moldovan police officer as a test of his intentions before selling him the cesium-137. Cesium-135 is not potent enough for use in a dirty bomb. The AP reported that a fourth man in the smuggling ring, reportedly in possession of the cesium-137, which is suitable for a dirty bomb, escaped.

Moldovan authorities quoted in the AP story said they thought that the radioactive material came from Russia and that the breakdown in U.S.-Russian relations was making it more difficult to track smugglers.

Kirby said that cooperation with Russia on stemming illicit trafficking in nuclear materials is “certainly an issue where we believe there can be cooperative efforts.” There have been such efforts, and “we hope that there will continue to be,” he said.

The February arrests are among several in recent years involving illicit trafficking of radioactive material through Moldova. Most recently, in December 2014, six people were arrested in the eastern European country for trying to sell radioactive materials and uranium-238. U-238 is the most common isotope of uranium, but unlike U-235, it cannot be used as a nuclear explosive material.

The International Atomic Energy Agency tracks theft, loss, and unauthorized use of radioactive materials in its Incident and Trafficking Database, which receives information from about 130 countries. Between 1993 and 2014, the agency confirmed 2,734 illicit incidents involving radioactive materials.

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