

Ahead of nuclear summit, US says safeguarding loose radioactive materials top priority

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Washington: Safeguarding loose nuclear materials around the globe is a top priority for the US, the White House has said ahead of the Nuclear Security Summit here later this week, which among others would be attended by leaders from India, China and Japan.

“I would anticipate that issues related to nuclear materials and safeguarding them is high on the agenda (of the Nuclear Security Summit). This is obviously something that is a top priority,” White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest told reporters at his daily news conference Monday.

The summit is more focused on those nuclear materials that are not under the same kind of careful watchful eye that they are in Belgium, he said when asked about reports that the terrorists behind the Brussels attack were also conducting surveillance of nuclear site in the country.

“We understand that the Belgian government has decided to employ on-site military quick-response teams at nuclear plants and research centers while it determines what other actions may be necessary. Obviously, ensuring the safety of those kinds of facilities can and should be a top priority.

“As with other elements of the steps that Belgium has taken to protect our country, we are prepared to offer assistance if necessary in safeguarding Belgium’s nuclear facilities,” Earnest said. President Obama has made this a priority because frankly this is an issue that he worked on prior to entering the White House. The President spent a decent amount of time working across the aisle with Senator Dick Lugar of Indiana on efforts around the globe to safeguard nuclear materials, he said. “This has been a priority for the President since before he took office.

That is why we created a venue like the Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) to give additional attention to this issue and to make clear to the Americans and governments around the world that this is a top priority of the US. “The next President will come in with a mandate to make their own decisions about what elements of our national security need to be prioritised and what is the best way to do that,” Earnest said.

Earlier in the day, Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation Thomas Countryman, told reporters during a web cast said the NSS, which has been held every two years, is a crucial element of the US strategy to keep terrorists from acquiring fissile material to make nuclear weapons.

“**This year’s summit is not just about declarations but about real-world results. It is not just the elimination of highly enriched uranium and plutonium stocks from many countries, it also means a genuine improvement in the physical security and, just as importantly, the security procedures in every country that possesses significant stocks of fissile material,**” he said.

In April 2009 during his Prague speech, Obama identified the risk of nuclear terrorism as the most immediate threat to global security.

He called for a worldwide effort to secure all vulnerable nuclear material and a summit to raise the issue of nuclear terrorism to the highest levels of government.

The US hosted the first summit in 2010, South Korea hosted the summit in 2012 and the Netherlands hosted the 2014 summit.

“Since the first Nuclear Security Summit in 2010, the international community and international organisations have made significant steps to strengthen the security of nuclear material, including successfully removing or down blending highly enriched uranium, or HEU, and plutonium from over 50 facilities in 30 countries, which is enough material for 130 nuclear weapons,” said US Coordinator for Threat Reduction Programs Bonnie Jenkins.

Leaders of nearly 24 countries will be attending the two- day National Security Summit on March 31 and April 1 including Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. No bilateral meeting between the two leaders have been announced so far.

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