Printer friendly version

July 12, 2005

CHEMICAL-PLANT SECURITY

Congress must act

Last week, Islamic terrorists showed - once again - that they can attack whenever and wherever they want. This time, it was London's subways and a bus, a day after the city was named host of the 2012 Summer Olympics.

And the next time?

Perhaps one of the more 100 chemical plants in the United States - including seven in New Jersey - that could endanger more than 1 million in a worst-case scenario.

Shockingly, almost four full years after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, there are still no mandatory, federal security standards for the more than 10,000 plants nationwide that produce and store a toxic stew of chemicals.

In the days before the London bombings last week, the Congressional Research Service released a report providing a state-by-state breakdown of the most dangerous plants. U.S. Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., hopes to use the material to convince the administration to commit to security upgrades at the plants.

U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine, D-N.J., has been trying to win approval of his Chemical Security Act, which would establish mandatory security standards at the plants, since October 2001. But he has been stymied by lobbying from the chemical industry and by the administration's long-standing (but now weakening) position that the chemical industry can voluntarily address security concerns.

Markey and Corzine have built a strong case for tougher security measures at the plants. The issue is far too important, and the plants far too tempting a target, for voluntary standards to even be on the table. In addition to the more than 100 plants with a million-plus people downwind, there are 750 plants where attacks could endanger more than 100,000 people, according to Corzine's Web site.

The terrorists' willingness to engage in large-scale attacks is painfully clear.

The need for mandatory security standards at the nation's chemical plants is equally clear.

And Congress' failure to enact such standards is puzzling, if not shocking.