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## Georgia Says It Blocked Smuggling of Arms-Grade Uranium

By LAWRENCE SCOTT SHEETS and [WILLIAM J. BROAD](#)

TBILISI, [Georgia](#), Jan. 24 — Georgian authorities intercepted an illicit shipment of highly enriched uranium last January, the second seizure of weapons-grade material here in two and a half years, officials here say.

The interior minister, Ivane Merabishvili, said in a recent interview that agents had arrested a Russian man carrying 100 grams of uranium, a little under four ounces, into Georgia from Russia. The authorities had previously reported that they had arrested a man in 2003 trying to cross the border between Georgia and Armenia with 170 grams of uranium.

Although nuclear experts said neither episode involved enough material to build a nuclear weapon, the two seizures raised concerns about illicit trade in material from the nuclear operations of the former Soviet Union. These cases are believed to be the first involving smuggling of highly enriched uranium in the region in at least five years.

Russian officials did not respond to requests for comment.

This activity “in the worst-case scenario could be very detrimental to international security,” said John F. Tefft, the American ambassador to Georgia. Georgia and the United States have focused on detecting smuggling of radioactive materials across the borders of former Soviet republics like Russia and Armenia.

The 2006 smuggling case, which has not been previously reported, is expected to be noted in a report from the [United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency](#) on illicit nuclear activities, agency officials said. That report is expected to be released this week.

Georgian and American officials said United States law enforcement and nuclear experts had been involved in the investigation of the second seizure. Richard J. Kolko, an [F.B.I.](#) spokesman, confirmed that the bureau had taken part in the inquiry but declined to elaborate.

In addition to the two cases involving enriched uranium, Mr. Merabishvili said, Georgian authorities intercepted an illicit shipment of raw uranium, or yellowcake, in August 2006.

That case involved 2.2 pounds of raw uranium that the authorities said was being smuggled from the separatist region of Abkhazia. One man was arrested, said Archil Pavlenishvili, Georgia’s chief investigator for nuclear trafficking.

He said that agents had learned about the raw uranium from sources in the criminal underworld and that the investigation was continuing.

The Georgian officials said they believed that corrupt law enforcement officials in Abkhazia had helped

ensure the safe passage of the shipment. Officials in Abkhazia said they had not been informed about the arrest, but they promised to assist in any investigation.

*Lawrence Scott Sheets reported from Tbilisi, and William J. Broad from New York.*

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