

X-Ray Weapon 'Stuff of Comic Books'

Michael Virtanen, Associated Press



The portable X-ray weapon that two upstate New York men are accused of trying to build to secretly sicken Muslims and enemies of Israel isn't feasible, radiation researchers say, calling it "the stuff of comic books."

Glendon Scott Crawford and Eric J. Feight were charged with conspiracy to support terrorism in an indictment unsealed this week. Authorities say they built a remote-control switch they planned to attach to a van-mounted, industrial X-ray machine to secretly radiate people who would get sick or die days later.

However, radiation safety experts at the University of Rochester and University of New Mexico said there were several problems with the plot: Any device to accelerate radiation would take massive amounts of electricity, the weight would probably crush most vans and victims would have to remain still to face prolonged exposure from radiation at close range.

"There is no instant death ray. ... It's not feasible. It's the stuff of comic books," said Dr. Frederic Mis, radiation safety officer at the University of Rochester Medical Center, after reading the criminal complaint describing their plan. "That's going to be the interesting thing for the court to face because their designs would not have worked."

At a brief hearing Thursday, U.S. Magistrate Christian Hummel ordered Crawford, 49, and Feight, 54, held without bail until a preliminary hearing in July, saying they posed a threat to public safety. Defense lawyers argued they were not a threat and

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should get bail.

Crawford was arrested this week immediately after attaching the remote control Feight built to the X-ray machine, which was inoperable and provided by undercover FBI agents, at a warehouse in Schaghticoke. He turned it on but for his own safety didn't flip the switch to emit radiation, prosecutors said. The evening and morning before that, Crawford showed them two intended targets, an Albany mosque and an Islamic center in Schenectady.

Federal authorities showed the device and its specifications to a radiation expert who considered it a credible threat, prosecutors said. They declined to name the expert.

Mis, the University of Rochester expert, said prolonged X-ray exposure does kill tissue, with skin ulcerations appearing from a week to months later. "What we worry about in radiology primarily is skin damage," he said.

For safety, they advise staff to limit entering or performing diagnostics in an X-ray area, Mis said. There are accounts of Russians fatally injecting or feeding radiation to victims, and even planting it in a chair a victim repeatedly sat in, he said, noting the possibility the designers here could have hurt themselves or accidentally someone else.

"What if they find someone sleeping on a park bench? What if they backed up the van, opened the door, and turned the device on for eight hours?" Mis said. "Even these guys might stumble upon somebody and hurt somebody."

Dr. Fred Mettler, former chairman of the Department of Radiology at the University of New Mexico, was unfamiliar with the specifics of Crawford's plans but said it's unlikely such a device could work. Radiation can be narrowly beamed, as it is in some cancer treatments, but the accelerators require huge amounts of electricity, are not easily portable and any target would have to remain still for a long time, he said.

The investigation by the FBI in Albany and police agencies began in April 2012 after authorities received information that Crawford had approached local Jewish organizations to help fund a weapon to use against enemies of Israel, authorities said. Crawford, an industrial mechanic for General Electric in Schenectady, knew Feight, an outside GE contractor with engineering skills, through work, they said.

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