

## Armenian smugglers tried to sell nuclear material to terrorists

The former Soviet republic of Armenia has emerged as a potential flashpoint for nuclear smuggling after it was revealed that two Armenian nationals tried to sell highly enriched uranium to people they thought were terrorists in March.

By Andrew Osborn in Moscow  
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The revelation, which emerged from a secret trial being held in neighbouring **Georgia**, suggested that nuclear smugglers are still very active along the borders of the former Soviet Union.

Mikheil Saakashvili, the president of Georgia, announced in April that his country, a staunch US ally, had uncovered and foiled a plot to sell highly enriched uranium (HEU) to an Islamist extremist group.



Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili claimed that he had uncovered and foiled a plot to sell highly enriched uranium to an Islamist extremist group. Photo: EPA

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But the details of the operation were not known until Sunday when it was disclosed that two **Armenian** nationals, a businessman called Sumbat Tonoyan and a physicist called Hrant Ohanyan, were implicated in the smuggling case. Both men have pleaded guilty.

Prosecutors said they had smuggled 18 grams of HEU by train from the capital of Armenia, Yerevan, to the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi, in a lead-lined cigarette box. Such a quantity was nowhere near enough to make a nuclear bomb but was meant as a "taster sample" with more HEU available if the buyer was satisfied.

The smugglers thought they were dealing with an Islamist extremist group.

In fact, they were set up by the Georgian secret service.

The trial, which is being held in camera, has underlined how little about the illicit trade in nuclear smuggling is known.

**It is unclear how much stolen nuclear material is already in circulation and how much may have already been purchased by extremist groups.**

The HEU intercepted was 89.4 per cent enriched and therefore usable in a nuclear warhead.

There is some evidence that the consignment, together with two others before it, was sourced from a nuclear fuel plant in Novosibirsk in Siberia, Russia.