A new International Red Cross report estimates that the total death toll from the U.S. nuclear strike against an Al Qaeda atomic bomb lab in Syria will eventually reach 1,000 civilians, including long term deaths due to the strike. An additional 1,200 people are still being treated in local hospitals for non-life threatening injuries, primarily burns suffered during the attack.

Two American nuclear-tipped cruise missiles struck targets near the town of As-Safih in northern Syria yesterday in what the U.S. officials have called an act of self-defense against an imminent terrorist nuclear attack.

Since the strike, high ranking government sources from the United States and Russia have confirmed that the U.S. military operation destroyed an underground Al Qaeda weapons facility in which the components for at least two nuclear weapons were being assembled. Last week, Russian intelligence agents intercepted a shipment of approximately 70 pounds of nuclear weapons-grade uranium being smuggled from Russia to the Al Qaeda camp. The seized uranium would have been sufficient to fuel a crude nuclear bomb.

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Russian officials determined that the suspects in the smuggling operation were employed at a Russian nuclear facility, and that an additional 150 pounds of weapons-grade uranium were missing from the site. The suspects confirmed under questioning that an earlier shipment of uranium was successfully delivered to the Al Qaeda weapons lab, where the nuclear weapons were being assembled.

The Al Qaeda facility was comprised of a series of deeply buried caves and tunnels, which made destruction of the facility difficult. Speaking to reporters, Pentagon Spokesman John Harkins said, “We did everything possible to minimize the loss of life in Syria, but we decided to use nuclear weapons to destroy Al Qaeda’s nuclear weapons before al-Zawahiri could use them against us.”

According to Dr. David Wright, an expert on military operations and weapons at the Union of Concerned Scientists, an independent think-tank based in Washington, D.C., the U.S. had few other options. “It would have been very difficult to destroy the deeply buried bunkers without using nuclear weapons,” he said. Wright also warned that the Al Qaeda bombs, while crude, would have caused catastrophic damage if used in a crowded urban area. “If a bomb of this size exploded in New York City, it could easily kill 50,000 – 70,000 people,” he said.