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**HEADLINE:** Attacks' leader considered hitting nuclear power plant

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The 9/11 Commission Report has confirmed something long feared since the terrorist attacks: The plot's ringleader had considered crashing a jet into a nuclear power plant.

The report states that Mohamed Atta, who piloted one of the planes that hit the World Trade Center, "considered targeting a nuclear facility he had seen during familiarization flights near New York."

The nuclear plant was not identified, but the report says the plotters already had agreed to target the World Trade Center and rented planes from Teterboro Airport in northern New Jersey. Their test flights included trips along the Hudson River air corridor, the report states. The Indian Point nuclear power plants in Buchanan are about 35 miles from Manhattan. Other area nuclear power plants - Oyster Creek and Salem in southern New Jersey and James A. FitzPatrick in Oswego - are more than 100 miles from the World Trade Center.

Other pilots involved in the terrorist plot were opposed to Atta's plan to strike such a target, according to the commission's final report, "because the airspace around it was restricted, making reconnaissance flights impossible and increasing the likelihood that any plane would be shot down before impact."

"Moreover, unlike the approved targets," the report states, "this alternative had not been discussed with senior al-Qaeda leaders and therefore did not have the requisite blessing. Nor would a nuclear facility have particular symbolic value."

The information contained in the 567-page report, released Thursday, produced conflicting reactions yesterday from Indian Point supporters and opponents.

"Residents in the counties can be reassured that these plants are not the attractive targets that some people take them to be," said Jim Steets, spokesman for Entergy Nuclear Northeast, which owns the twin reactors at Indian Point.

"We have always felt that they are not vulnerable to that type of attack," Steets said, "and that is why we have security. And since 9/11, we have spent millions and

millions of dollars on enhancements to both the security and the physical infrastructure defenses of Indian Point."

U.S. Rep. Eliot Engel, D-Bronx, said the region surrounding Indian Point was fortunate the terrorist planners overestimated the defensive capabilities of nuclear power plants.

"They thought a nuclear target would be difficult because the airspace is restricted," Engel said. "Before Sept. 11, all of us had the false feeling that a plane could not hit all these targets because surely we would have some plan in place where the planes would be shot down. But we learned quickly that if someone violated airspace, there were no plans to shoot down planes in time. There really were no no-fly zones around nuclear power plants."

Nuclear power plants do not have anti-missile protection and are not likely to get them.

"We oppose the use of anti-missile batteries at nuclear plant sites," said Neil Sheehan, a spokesman for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. "You would have to have officials available 24 hours a day to make snap decisions whether a plane crossing into the airspace was deemed to be a threat. We don't believe that is a practical approach."

Sheehan said the focus should be on improving airport scrutiny of passengers and planes to prevent hijackings.

Kyle Rabin, of the environmental group Riverkeeper, a leader in the movement to close Indian Point, said more needed to be done to ensure the plants were secure from attacks by the air or from the Hudson River.

"Terrorists used the Hudson River corridor for training, and it is obvious that Indian Point was in their cross hairs and remains an attractive target for terrorists," Rabin said.

Congress yesterday forwarded to the White House legislation requiring the Coast Guard to assess the security of all nuclear power plants located on major waterways. The House bill, initiated by Engel, initially dealt only with Indian Point but was expanded in the Senate version to include all nuclear plants. The House then adopted the Senate version.

"Post-9/11, we have to be extra careful when it comes to security," Engel said. "We have overlooked the danger to nuclear plants from the air, and we ought to think about the possibility of attacks from the water."

Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., who sponsored the Senate bill, said all necessary steps must be taken to safeguard nuclear power plants from attack.

"Indian Point and New York's other nuclear power plants are all located on the water, and it is important that the Coast Guard evaluate whether they are vulnerable to terrorist attack from the water," she said.

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