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CIA Reportedly Probing New York Virus Outbreak

NEW YORK (Reuters) - The CIA is investigating whether a recent outbreak of West Nile-like fever in New York might have been an attempt at bio-terrorism, The New Yorker magazine reported Sunday. The virus, which killed five people and made at least 27 others ill, is believed to have been passed to people via mosquitoes that bit infected birds.

Without quoting anyone directly at the Central Intelligence Agency, the magazine describes analysts there as having a "whiff of concern" that it might have been sent deliberately to the United States. Many experts have been warning for years that the United States is vulnerable to a bio-terrorism attack. But none has ever named West Nile as one of the potential weapons- anthrax, botulin toxin and even bubonic plague are considered to be the potential weapons of choice. West Nile virus is not particularly deadly and causes only mild flu-like symptoms in most people. The very young, very old or ill can develop encephalitis-a swelling of the brain-and die. Last week the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said 50 potential or definite cases of West Nile-like fever had been identified in New York and said the outbreak was definitely on the wane. No new cases have been reported since Sept. 17. But the report in The New Yorker said the CDC had been asked to check on whether the virus could have been deliberately spread.

"We're taking it seriously. We'll see where the data take us," the magazine quoted "a person at the CDC" as saying. Navy Secretary Richard Danzig told the magazine he was not alarmed.

"Even if you suspect biological terrorism, it's hard to prove," he said. The magazine cites a book written by a man using the name Mikhael Ramadan, who claimed to be an Iraqi defector and said Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was planning to make a weapon out of a strain of West Nile virus. He described it as being "capable of destroying 97 percent of all life in an urban environment." The CDC has said it is concerned about the New York outbreak because West Nile fever has never been seen in the Americas before. It is common in Africa and Asia.

Last year, U.S. and Romanian experts reported in The Lancet medical journal that a 1996 outbreak in Romania had been identified as West Nile fever, with a mortality rate of between 4 and 8 percent. They said Europe was vulnerable to more such outbreaks.

Last week, Thomas Briese and colleagues at the University of California at Irvine said they had identified the New York virus as a Kunjin/West Nile-like flavivirus.