

European press leaks US military reports on nuclear weapons safety

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Prominent European news outlets—including the British *Financial Times*, Germany's *Berliner Zeitung* and *Der Spiegel*, and France's *Le Monde*—are revealing details of US military reports on the poor status of US nuclear weapons security. These reports, and subsequent discussions by European politicians, raise disturbing questions over the US military's loose handling of nuclear weapons and show the European bourgeoisie's growing concerns over the potentially explosive consequences of US military policy.

On June 18 Admiral Kirkland Donald presented a report to the US Congress on US military oversight of nuclear weapons. The Congressional briefing was held secretly and went unreported in US media.

The report was commissioned by US Defense Secretary Robert Gates after revelations this March that in 2006, four US nuclear missile fuses had been shipped to Taiwan in crates labeled as containing batteries for helicopters. In another disturbing incident reported last September, a B-52 flew over the US while armed with nuclear cruise missiles, without authorization. On the basis of Donald's report, Gates summarily fired Air Force Secretary Michael Wynne and chief of Staff General Michael Moseley on June 5.

On June 19 the *Financial Times* obtained elements of the report and published an article based on its findings. It wrote: "The US military cannot locate hundreds of sensitive nuclear missile components, according to several government officials familiar with a Pentagon report on nuclear safeguards. [...] According to previously undisclosed details obtained by the FT, the investigation also concluded that the air force could not account for many sensitive components previously included in its nuclear inventory. One official said the number of missing components was more than 1,000."

The *Financial Times* quoted Daryl Kimball of the

Arms Control Association in Washington, who said the report "raises a serious question about where else these unaccounted-for warhead-related parts may have gone. I would not be surprised if the recent Taiwan incident is not the only one."

Also on June 19, the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) posted a redacted version of an internal US Air Force (USAF) report on poor security at US nuclear installations in Europe on its web site. The report made clear that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are stretching the US military to the breaking point, and preventing it from undertaking necessary training, upkeep, and security at nuclear weapons facilities.

According to *Le Monde*, the US has nuclear weapons in airbases at Lakenheath in Great Britain, Volkel in the Netherlands, Kleine Brogel in Belgium, Buchel and Ramstein in Germany, Ghedi Torre and Aviano in Italy, and Incirlik in Turkey. It estimated that the US has about 480 nuclear warheads in Europe, down from over 4,000 during the Cold War, of which approximately 180 are being held by allied armed forces.

The USAF report found that "Examples of areas noted in need to repair at several of the sites include support buildings, fencing, lighting, and security systems," and that guards at nuclear facilities often had as little as 9 months' training. The report concluded: "most sites require significant additional resources to meet DOD [Department of Defense] security requirements."

The FAS wrote, "As a result of these security problems, according to other sources, the US plans to withdraw its nuclear custodial unit from at least one base and consolidate the remaining nuclear mission in Europe at fewer bases." On June 26, Reuters and other

news agencies cited a further FAS report that the US had withdrawn its nuclear weapons from its airbase at Lakenheath.

Summarizing the report's findings on force preparedness, the FAS wrote: "the primary mission of the squadrons and wings is not nuclear deterrence but real-world conventional operations in support of the war on terrorism and other campaigns. This dual-mission has created a situation where many nuclear positions are 'one-deep,' and where rotations, deployments, and illnesses can cause shortfalls."

As the WWSWS has already pointed out, US military negligence and short-staffing of nuclear forces raise troubling questions. Are US nuclear weapons stockpiles, which can destroy the world many times over, being maintained carefully enough to prevent radioactive contamination or, worse, accidental detonation?

With reports of over 1,000 sensitive missile parts missing, it is also logical to ask whether these disappearances rise beyond the accidental, and are part of a criminal operation or indeed a deliberate foreign policy mounted by a section of the US armed forces.

The silence of the US government and media on these questions does nothing to allay suspicions that the answers would be politically explosive, if they became widely known. Indeed, the response of the Chinese government in Beijing to the news of US nuclear missile component shipments to its military rival, Taiwan—it demanded and received a formal apology from President Bush—indicates that Beijing, quite logically, viewed this event not as a technical accident, but rather as an event on the level of state policy.

It is also highly significant that these revelations are taking place in European media. The concerns of European bourgeois politicians are bound up with their fears that US foreign policy, and especially its attempts to control the Middle East by force, risks making the European bourgeoisie's alliance with Washington utterly untenable in the face of European public opinion.

As several European politicians pointed out, the collapse of the USSR has deflated assertions that US nuclear weapons stationed in Europe serve as a deterrent force. Instead, they worry they would face accusations of collaboration with the US, should the US use these bombs for further aggression in the Middle

East.

Several opposition German politicians have used the report of lack of security at the US' European bases to call for the withdrawal of US nuclear forces. Guido Westerwelle of the pro-business Free Democratic Party told the *Berliner Zeitung*: "Atomic weapons in Germany are relics of the Cold War and need to go." He added the report was "one more reason to remove all of the tactical atomic weapons stored in Germany."

Der Spiegel wrote that Green Party leader Jürgen Trittgen called upon Chancellor Angela Merkel to "denounce all German involvement with nuclear weapons, as having them located in Germany presupposes the military's active participation in a nuclear war waged by NATO." Merkel's foreign policy spokesman Eckart von Klaeden responded by saying of the US nuclear weapons that "we cannot relinquish them as long as there are nuclear weapons in the world. They protect us."

Le Monde noted that controversy already surrounds US nuclear weapons in Belgium. In January of this year, Belgian Defense Minister Pieter de Crem created a scandal by revealing the existence of US nuclear weapons at Kleine Brogel. In its report on the matter, the Belgian daily *Le Soir* reported on calls for the weapons to be removed from Belgian soil and worried openly, "Could Belgium be led to participate one day in a pre-emptive nuclear action, for instance against Iran?"

Belgian politicians Jean-Arthur Régibeau and Jean-Pol Henry of the Belgian francophone Socialist Party (PS) told the French think-tank Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique: "The use of US nuclear weapons against targets to the south is contrary to the letter and spirit which dictated their deployment during the Cold War. At worst, US mismanagement of the Iranian question could lead to reactions from Belgian public opinion that would force US nuclear weapons to leave the Kingdom [of Belgium]."



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