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China View
25 April 2009

U.S., Russia Revive Ties through Talks on Reducing Nuclear Weapons

by Silvia Marchetti

ROME, April 24 (Xinhua) -- U.S. and Russian negotiators met in Rome for the first time on Friday to revive bilateral relations and further discussions on the reduction of nuclear weapons.

Both sides said they were satisfied with the outcomes of the initial talks and were optimistic about future steps in the process, which was aimed at creating a new treaty to replace the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty or START I before it expires in December this year.

The two sides are expecting a bilateral agreement at the end of 2009.

The meeting took place at the U.S. embassy in Rome. Rose Gottemoeller, U.S. assistant secretary of state for verification and compliance, and Anatoly Antonov, chief of security and disarmament at the Russian Foreign Ministry, attended the meeting.

The Rome meeting was of crucial importance as it launched a new strategic cooperation in nuclear non-proliferation between the new U.S. administration and Russia. The talks represented the first breakthrough in bilateral relations and followed U.S. President Barack Obama's engagement in Prague on April 5 for a global nuclear disarmament phase.

The prospective new treaty will be the first step in the no-nuclear agenda embraced by Obama and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev in a joint declaration at the London G20 summit.

Italy hosted the bilateral meeting in the capacity of the rotating G8 president. Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini hailed the event as "very important in reviving U.S.-Russian relations" and said he was pleased it took place in Rome.

"Nuclear non-proliferation will be on top of the G8 agenda," he told reporters. Both sides said the meeting focused on procedural issues and added they were ready for further cuts in nuclear armaments.

President Obama will visit Russia for the first time in July and by then the two negotiators should come up with a definite agreement to replace the START I treaty. More meetings are expected to take place in Washington and Moscow in the next two months to further consultations.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his U.S. counterpart Hillary Clinton are planning to meet in Washington in May to check on the progress made by the experts.

"We expect on the basis of this very productive meeting today that we will have a good report for them in July," Gottemoeller told reporters at a joint press conference following the talks.

"I hope we are able to prepare a new draft by the end of the year, or at least do our utmost," Antonov added.

To reach a new agreement on nuclear reduction is considered by both sides a milestone in reviving the strained U.S.-Russian relations.

Compared with policies of former U.S. president George W. Bush, who rejected Russia's requests of toughening non-proliferation measures and weapons reduction, Obama's approach opened a new phase of nuclear cooperation.

The START I treaty was launched in 1991 and came into force in 1994. It limited the number of warheads and reduced ways of delivering them.

The START I treaty banned the production, testing and deployment of air-launched ballistic missiles, underwater launch systems for ballistic and cruise missiles, as well as orbital missiles. It has now become obsolete and must be replaced or toughened by a new agreement.

According to Russian and U.S. arms control experts, the new upgraded treaty will seek to reduce arsenals to 1,500 on each side.

However, the United States still needs to revise its nuclear strategy, specifically with regard to Bush's plan of an anti-terrorist nuclear attack.

One of the critical points of the negotiations, according to Antonov, is the anti-Iran missile shield to be built in Poland and the Czech Republic, near Russian borders.

Russia and the United States account for 96 percent of the total of 25,000 nuclear weapons in the world.

According to Italian daily La Repubblica, the treaty is to pave the way for a new era of the global non-proliferation.

For Silvio Fagiolo, professor of international relations at LUISS University in Rome and former Italian ambassador to Germany, "Obama is keeping his promise of nuclear non-proliferation and reviving a central Cold War treaty that in several points the United States has not respected."

http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-04/25/content_11254732.htm

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Times of London

April 27, 2009

Cutting the Nuclear Arsenals

Russian and American negotiators began work at the weekend on their ambitious plans to rid the world of nuclear weapons. The talks are intended to produce a new agreement to replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (Start) that expires in December. This time, however, both sides are committed to cutting their arsenals well below the current combined total of 5,000 warheads, after the declaration by presidents Obama and Medvedev in London on April 1 that they would work towards the scrapping of all nuclear arms. It is a fraught endeavour, but a very worthwhile one.

It is a visionary aim, and revives one of the main vehicles for reducing East-West tensions during the Cold War. President Obama has returned to arms control, one of the goals outlined in his inaugural address, as a way of improving America's strained relations with Russia. But it will be difficult to achieve. For as warhead numbers are reduced, related issues become more complicated. If, for example, both sides cut their totals to 1,500 each, verification becomes more important, especially for the Russians, who know that the Americans could rebuild their arsenals more quickly. And this would mean Russia's defence ministry and arms factories accepting more transparency than they have before.

The second issue is delivery systems. Russia fears it will lose out in cuts, as its long-range missiles are ageing and probably far less reliable than US missiles. Last week Mr Medvedev insisted that any new treaty should limit all systems, including the strategic triad of intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-based missiles and heavy bombers. But the Americans have an advantage that strategists might be reluctant to abandon, especially as they are deeply worried about the threat of missiles fired by states still building up offensive capabilities. But with warhead numbers reduced to about the 1,000 mark proposed by Mr Obama, the US would have to consider abandoning one leg of its strategic triad.

The third risk in a drastic reduction of warheads is that the two former superpowers have less of an advantage over other nuclear powers, especially China. The deterrents still hosted by Britain and France are unlikely to upset the balance, but China appears determined still to maintain its arsenals at current levels, as do India, Pakistan and Israel. The importance, therefore, of each warhead being up to date and fully operational increases. That will make it harder for Mr Obama to persuade Congress to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which it refused to do in 1999. It may also raise pressure to resume some form of testing.

The talks will also raise questions about other arms treaties. The Russians are unwilling to make concessions as long as the US is committed to the Bush Administration programme of installing an anti-missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. Mr Obama has signalled that this may not now go ahead, but much depends on Iran and North Korea, which have reacted aggressively to his conciliatory overtures.

The key issue in all talks will be mutual trust. That broke down during the Bush Administration. The relationship may now be on the mend. But it will take months of tough bargaining before either Russia or America is ready to lead the way to a world without nuclear weapons.

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/leading_article/article6175415.ece

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RIA Novosti
27/04/2009

Russia-U.S. START Talks to be held in Moscow in May

MOSCOW, April 27 (RIA Novosti) - The first round of full-format Russia-U.S. talks on a new strategic arms reduction treaty will be held on May 18-20 in Moscow, the Russian Foreign Ministry said Monday.

The Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty (START 1), signed in 1991, obliges Russia and the United States to reduce nuclear warheads to 6,000 and their delivery vehicles to 1,600 each. The treaty expires on December 5 this year.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said in Helsinki last week that any new deal to replace START 1 must also cover delivery systems.

Medvedev and U.S. President Barack Obama agreed at their first meeting in London earlier this month on an immediate start to talks on a new strategic arms reduction treaty.

<http://en.rian.ru/russia/20090427/121337669.html>

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Straits Times – Singapore
April 27, 2009

Japan Criticizes Nuclear Ambition

TOKYO - JAPAN'S foreign minister criticised China for withholding information about its nuclear weapons Monday and urged more transparency from Beijing.

Foreign Minister Hirofumi Nakasone also called North Korea's missile and nuclear programs a serious threat to regional and global stability.

'China continues to modernize its nuclear arsenals but has not undertaken any nuclear arms reductions,' Mr Nakasone said. 'Nor does the country disclose any information on its nuclear arsenals.'

Mr Nakasone, speaking at a Tokyo hotel to outline Japan's initiative for global nuclear disarmament, also urged other nuclear states, including the US, Russia, India and Pakistan, to step up their effort toward nuclear disarmament.

'Improved transparency and nuclear weapons reduction by China and other nuclear states are vital for the progress of global nuclear arms reduction,' he said.

Beijing says its nuclear weapons development is for defense only.

Japan also has repeatedly criticized China's growing military spending and its murkiness.

Mr Nakasone's speech came before Prime Minister Taro Aso heads to Beijing on Wednesday for a two-day official visit.

Mr Nakasone praised President Barack Obama's recent speech mapping out his vision to achieve a world without atomic weapons. Mr Nakasone said Japan fully supports Washington's initiative.

The day Mr Obama spoke in Prague, North Korea launched a rocket that flew over Japan. Mr Nakasone condemned the launch and urged the North to 'seriously face the message from the international community.' -- AP

http://www.straitstimes.com/Breaking%2BNews/Asia/Story/STIStory_369361.html

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China View
27 April 2009

Japan Urges Major Powers to Cut Nuclear Stockpiles

TOKYO, April 27 (Xinhua) -- Japan urged nuclear powers Monday to reduce their stockpiles of nuclear weapons as a step toward a nuclear-free world.

In a speech entitled "Conditions towards Zero -- 11 Benchmarks for Global Nuclear Disarmament," Foreign Minister Hirofumi Nakasone put forward an 11-point initiative for promoting global nuclear disarmament.

"In order to realize a world free of nuclear weapons, it is necessary that while nuclear weapons-holding states engage in nuclear disarmament, the entire international community adopts and complies with universal norms for disarmament and nonproliferation," Nakasone said.

Nakasone's speech came in supportive response to the remarks made on April 5 by U.S. President Barack Obama, who advocated a world without nuclear weapons and declared Washington's "moral responsibility to act" to that end.

The foreign minister called for bans on nuclear tests and the production of fissile material for weapon purposes as well as restrictions on ballistic missiles capable of delivering a nuclear warhead.

Nakasone said that his speech represents Japan's strong resolve to play the leading role in promoting global nuclear disarmament.

He said that it is Japan's long-cherished hope to realize a nuclear-free world and Japan is willing to help build the growing momentum for global sustainable nuclear disarmament.

http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-04/27/content_11268217.htm

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Global Security Newswire
Monday, April 27, 2009

New U.S. Global Strike Command to Juggle Nuclear, Conventional Missions

By Elaine M. Grossman

WASHINGTON -- U.S. Air Force leaders say nuclear weapons will be the central focus of a new Global Strike Command, but the service faces growing questions about how the strike headquarters will juggle its additional responsibilities in training and providing forces for conventional combat operations (see *GSN*, April 7).

Currently, two different Air Force commands are responsible for ICBM operations and bomber aircraft missions. The new Global Strike Command, expected to open its doors by October, is to oversee both types of nuclear delivery systems.

"Bringing them together under one command -- so that nuclear is No. 1 all the time and doesn't have to compete against other resourcing demands inside that command -- is certainly one of the virtues of Air Force Global Strike Command," Maj. Gen. Donald Alston, Air Force assistant chief of staff for strategic deterrence and nuclear integration, said Friday at a breakfast event on Capitol Hill.

However, B-2 and B-52 bombers are capable of carrying either nuclear weapons or conventional munitions. That dual role means that even if the new command puts nuclear missions as its highest priority, it must also grapple with day-to-day demands for bomber aircraft in their conventional role in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere around the world.

In the future, another conventional strike system is expected to come under the new command's purview, as well.

The Air Force's first non-nuclear "prompt global strike" weapon -- the Conventional Strike Missile -- could be fielded as early as 2012, according to defense officials. Alston said he has not yet had an opportunity to sort out how operational authority over the new, long-range conventional weapon system would be integrated into Global Strike Command.

For many years -- with bombers flying in Iraq and elsewhere in their conventional combat role -- Defense Department leaders viewed Air Combat Command as the appropriate headquarters to oversee training for the long-range aircraft.

Meanwhile, Space Command has taken responsibility for the preparedness of ICBMs, which share some of the same rocket technologies as those used for satellite launches.

However, an independent task force on nuclear weapons management, headed by former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, last year recommended establishing a single, consolidated command to oversee nuclear operations (see *GSN*, Sept. 15, 2008).

Defense Secretary Robert Gates convened the panel following revelations about the Air Force's unauthorized transfer of nuclear-armed cruise missiles from one base to another in 2007 and an unintentional shipment of nuclear fuses to Taiwan in 2006 (see *GSN*, Feb. 3).

Last June, Gates fired Air Force Secretary Michael Wynne and Chief of Staff Gen. Michael Moseley, saying the two had not moved assertively enough to reverse erosion in the service's ability to manage its nuclear weapons (see *GSN*, June 6, 2008).

Alston sought to assure his audience that today's Air Force -- led by Secretary Michael Donley and Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz -- understands the unique role that nuclear weapons must play in service operations.

"It is very important that the nuclear business is considered a special business," he said at the breakfast session, co-sponsored by the National Defense University Foundation and the National Defense Industrial Association. "These are nuclear weapons. The people that are involved in these systems at all levels -- whether they are in the field or they're at headquarters -- need to have special focus in order to be successful in these mission areas."

Still, with a brighter spotlight now on nuclear weapon safety and security, some are beginning to raise concerns that the Air Force might actually overemphasize the centrality of these arms in a post-Cold War world.

"The reality of the day for the bombers is not the nuclear mission," Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists said after hearing Alston's presentation last week. "Their [most pressing role] is to be ready to fly over to the Middle East and do missions there."

The new Global Strike Command, he said, almost certainly will have to grapple with the same challenge bedeviling Air Combat Command: balancing a need to carefully manage nuclear weapons with a sometimes-competing requirement to train bomber crews for their ongoing, conventional combat role.

"Today, Air Combat Command is the single Air Force provider for presenting organized, trained, and equipped conventional attack forces and nuclear-capable forces through Joint Forces Command to joint force commanders upon demand," according to Schlesinger's September 2008 task force report. "The current organizational approach has emphasized support for conventional combat campaigns, predominantly in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also in other operations around the world over the past 15-plus years."

Given this contest for attention and resources, "there is general acknowledgment that there has been substantial decay in the vitality, readiness, and resourcing" for nuclear-capable bomber forces, the task force stated.

"So what has changed in that sense?" said Kristensen, who directs the FAS Nuclear Information Project.

During a question-and-answer session at Friday's event, Kristensen asked Alston whether the new emphasis on the nuclear role might also send a confusing signal to the world that Washington now considers these weapons the preferred choice for prompt global strike.

Such a strategic approach would seemingly conflict with a Pentagon initiative over the past several years to highlight both nuclear and conventional weapon options for long-range attack, the analyst said. The Air Force might unwittingly stoke international tensions if it underscored a new significance for nuclear weapons at the expense of equilibrium sought in the Pentagon's "New Triad" construct -- which combines nuclear and conventional offenses, missile defenses, and a responsible national security framework -- Kristensen suggested.

Alston responded that he was unaware of any confusion over the matter, adding that the new command's dual approach would match that of the overarching, multiservice combatant headquarters, U.S. Strategic Command.

"STRATCOM's responsibilities include both conventional capability and nuclear capability," Alston said. "Global Strike [Command's] responsibilities are nuclear and conventional. So they will be directly connected to U.S. Strategic Command in support of the combatant commander."

The Air Force cannot "take our eye off that [conventional] part of our capability," said the two-star general. "The dual-role bomber force ... is providing a great deal of value to our forces deployed in Central Command. And as a consequence of that, we need to keep those skills up. They need to be able to continue to perform at the level that they're performing. That is a very demanding mission.

"At the same time," Alston added, "we cannot let that compete with the nuclear responsibilities that we have, and fail in our ability to deliver the nuclear deterrent ... We're ready to take all that on. We have done that and we will do it well inside Global Strike Command."

Kristensen remained unconvinced.

In declaring nuclear weapons the first priority for Global Strike Command, "they overemphasize the nuclear mission rather than put it in the proper perspective," Kristensen told *Global Security Newswire*. "It's one thing to fix the nuclear [management] deficiencies. ... It's quite another to signal to the world that you're now going to focus on the nuclear," with more pragmatic conventional strike missions taking a back seat, he said.

Global Strike Command has since Jan. 12 existed in a skeletal or "provisional" status at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, as the service assembles organizational components and devises its chain of command. Service leaders announced April 2 that, once the command becomes operational this fall, it would be based at Barksdale Air Force Base, La.

However, some lawmakers have challenged that decision, charging that military bases in other states scored higher in the Air Force's own internal assessment and would be better suited to house the global strike headquarters (see *GSN*, April 3).

http://www.globalsecuritynewswire.org/gsn/nw_20090427_2483.php

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RIA Novosti
28 April 2009

Russia to Conduct Five Tests of Bulava Missile in 2009

MOSCOW, April 28 (RIA Novosti) - The Russian Navy will conduct at least five test launches of the new Bulava sea-based ballistic missile in 2009, the deputy defense minister for procurements said on Tuesday.

Despite five failures in 10 trials, Russia's Defense Ministry is planning to complete a series of Bulava tests and put the ICBM into service by the end of 2009.

"Considering that we must ensure reliable performance characteristics of the [Bulava] missile, we have decided to raise the number of additional test launches to five, if everything goes well," Vladimir Popovkin said.

Popovkin, who is visiting the Russian exposition at the IDEF-2009 arms show in Turkey, said that a faulty detail caused a test launch failure in December last year, and that the on-board systems would undergo additional ground testing in June-July prior to the next test launch.

Vice Admiral Oleg Burtsev, deputy chief of the Navy General Staff, said in March that the Navy planned three Bulava test launches from the Dmitry Donskoi submarine this year. "If the tests are successful, they will continue on board the new Yury Dolgoruky nuclear-powered submarine," he said.

The Bulava-M (SS-NX-30) ICBM carries up to 10 nuclear warheads and has a range of 8,000 kilometers (5,000 miles). The three-stage ballistic missile is designed for deployment on Borey class Project 955 nuclear-powered submarines.

Meanwhile, sea trials of Yury Dolgoruky, Russia's first Borey class strategic nuclear submarine, are due to start in the summer, when navigation begins in the White Sea.

Two other Borey class nuclear submarines - the Alexander Nevsky and the Vladimir Monomakh - are currently under construction at the Sevmash shipyard, and are expected to be completed in 2009 and 2011. Russia is planning to build a total of eight submarines of this class by 2015.

<http://en.rian.ru/russia/20090428/121344078.html>

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Washington Times

April 24, 2009

Clinton Warns of Pakistan Nuke Risk

Nicholas Kralev and Barbara Slavin

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton warned Thursday that Pakistan has dispersed its nuclear weapons throughout the country, increasing the risk they could fall into terrorist hands as Taliban fighters move closer to the capital.

Her comments came as new satellite images suggested Pakistan is increasing its capacity to produce plutonium, a fuel for atomic bombs.

Mrs. Clinton, testifying on Capitol Hill for the second day in a row, had earlier accused Pakistan's government of abdicating to the Taliban. She was referring to a truce finalized this month that gave Taliban fighters control of a scenic valley just 100 miles from the capital, Islamabad, after two years of fighting.

"Why are we so concerned about this? One of the reasons is nuclear weapons," she told a House Appropriations subcommittee Thursday when asked about the truce. "We spend a lot of time worrying about Iran. Pakistan already has them, and they are widely dispersed in the country - they are not at a central location."

The imposition of Islamic law was part of the truce that gave the Taliban control of the Swat Valley. Within days of the agreement, the Taliban used Swat as a base from which to take control of another valley just 60 miles away from Islamabad.

Pakistan's Foreign Office defended the Swat peace deal even as it deployed about 100 paramilitary troops in an attempt to reverse the Taliban's latest conquest.

"Pakistan continues to play a positive and constructive role in the war against terror. It is victim of terrorism and with its inherent national resilience and strength, the country will succeed both against internal and external threats," Foreign Office spokesman Abdul Basit told reporters.

Gunmen attacked the Pakistani force, killing one officer as local officials made an unsuccessful attempt to negotiate yet another truce with the Taliban.

On the nuclear front, U.S. officials said that Pakistan continues to expand and improve its nuclear capabilities, but they conceded that Washington has not discussed the issue with the Pakistanis in depth for several years.

The officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the topic, declined to be more specific.

The Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) released images Thursday from Pakistan's Khushab plutonium-production facility that appear to support the U.S. assessment.

The organization said the images show that "major construction of the buildings associated with the second Khushab reactor is likely finished and that the roof beams are being placed on top of the third Khushab reactor hall."

"This suggests that Pakistan is increasing its plutonium capacity, and went from one reactor several years ago to having three," with the third yet to be completed, said Paul Brannan, senior research analyst at ISIS who co-authored an analysis released with the satellite photos. The institute is led by former U.N. weapons inspector David Albright.

Another think tank, the Arms Control Association, says on its Web site that Pakistan has about 60 nuclear warheads.

The latest satellite photos show a cylinder, a core component, inside the third reactor building. It is visible because the roof has not been completed.

In addition to the plutonium effort, Pakistan's uranium-based - and its original nuclear - program, started by Abdul Qadeer Khan, has experienced "enormous growth" in recent years, Mr. Brannan said.

Throughout the expansion of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, the United States has been a "worried bystander," he said.

"The anti-terrorism agenda has pushed out the concerns about expansion of the nuclear program," he said. "I'd like to think that you can do both at the same time."

Pakistani officials have always insisted the country's nuclear facilities are safe from terrorists.

"What we are sure of is that there is no likelihood of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists or extremists," a senior Pakistani official told The Washington Times. He requested anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject.

After the Sept. 11 attacks, the Bush administration reportedly spent \$100 million to help Pakistan upgrade security at its nuclear sites.

Daniel Markey, a senior fellow at Council on Foreign Relations, said Pakistan's nuclear weapons "are as safe as anything in the Pakistani military," which he said "is the institutional backbone of the Pakistani state."

But when it comes to defending the country from the Taliban and its allies, the Pakistani army suffers from "weakness and a lack of capacity" and "needs to be jolted out of complacency but it hasn't happened. We are in for a tough slog," Mr. Markey said.

The explosive mix of a growing nuclear arsenal and a growing Islamist insurgency reflects shifting ground beneath Washington and Islamabad even before the Obama administration has a chance to implement its strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

"Pakistan is facing societal shifts of great consequence," Lisa Curtis, a South Asia specialist at the Heritage Foundation, told a recent symposium on the region.

"The spread of a well-armed, well-prepared Islamic insurgency is starting to consume the country," Ms. Curtis said.

She accused the government of President Asif Ali Zardari of "pursuing a policy of appeasement" by signing a peace deal in Swat, as well as a separate decision last week to free a militant cleric who led a 2007 standoff with security forces at the Red Mosque in the heart of Islamabad.

The siege brought militant Islam within walking distance of Pakistan's parliament, Supreme Court and presidential offices. In the months leading up to the siege, Red Mosque vigilantes terrorized the city by attacking movie and music shops, kidnapping Chinese entertainers and heavily arming the mosque compound.

"We need a contingency containment strategy if the Pakistani military decides it's not going to hold the line against the militants," Ms. Curtis said.

Pakistan's army has suffered a series of embarrassing defeats in nearly every battle against Taliban forces in the mountainous northwest. The Taliban has killed hundreds of Pakistani troops and captured scores, sometimes without firing a single shot, and traded its hostages for imprisoned terrorists.

Sara A. Carter contributed to this report. Nasir Khan contributed to this report from Islamabad.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/apr/24/clinton-warns-of-pakistan-nuke-risk/>

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Time

April 24, 2009

Does Pakistan's Taliban Surge Raise a Nuclear Threat?

By MARK THOMPSON / WASHINGTON

When asked last year about the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Admiral Mike Mullen didn't hesitate: "I'm very comfortable that the nuclear weapons in Pakistan are secure," he said flatly. Asked the same question earlier this month, his answer had changed. "I'm reasonably comfortable," he said, "that the nuclear weapons are secure."

As America's top military officer, Mullen has traveled regularly to Pakistan — twice in just the past two weeks — for talks with his Pakistani counterpart, General Ashfaq Kayani, and others. And like all those who have risen to four-star rank, Mullen chooses his words with extreme care. Replacing "very comfortable" with "reasonably

comfortable" is a decidedly discomfoting signal of Washington's concern that no matter how well-guarded the nukes may be today, the chaos now enveloping Pakistan doesn't bode well for their status tomorrow or the day after.

The prospect of turmoil in Pakistan sends shivers up the spines of those U.S. officials charged with keeping tabs on foreign nuclear weapons. Pakistan is thought to possess about 100 — the U.S. isn't sure of the total, and may not know where all of them are. Still, if Pakistan collapses, the U.S. military is primed to enter the country and secure as many of those weapons as it can, according to U.S. officials.

The U.S. has been keeping a watchful eye on Pakistan's nukes since it first detonated a series of devices a decade ago. "Pakistan has taken important steps to safeguard its nuclear weapons, although vulnerabilities still exist," Army General Michael Maples, chief of the Defense Intelligence Agency, told the Senate Armed Services Committee last month. Then, he immediately turned to the threat posed by al-Qaeda, which, along with the Taliban, is sowing unrest in Pakistan. "Al-Qaeda continues efforts to acquire chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear materials," he said, "and would not hesitate to use such weapons if the group develops sufficient capabilities."

The concern in Washington is less that al-Qaeda or the Taliban would manage to actually seize Pakistan's nuclear weapons, but instead that increasingly-radicalized younger Pakistanis are finding their way into military and research circles where they may begin to play a growing role in the nation's nuclear-weapons program. Pakistani officials insist their personnel safeguards are stringent, but a sleeper cell could cause big trouble, U.S. officials say.

Nowhere in the world is the gap between would-be terror-martyrs and the nuclear weapons they crave as small as it is in Pakistan. Nor is their much comfort in the fact that Abdul Qadeer Khan, the father of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal who was recently ordered freed from house arrest by the country's supreme court, was the Johnny Appleseed of nuclear proliferation, dispatching the atomic genie to Iran, Libya and North Korea. But U.S. and Pakistani officials insist it is important to separate Pakistan's poor proliferation record with what is, by all accounts, a modern and multilayered system designed to protect its nuclear weapons from falling into the wrong hands.

For starters, according to U.S. and Pakistani officials, there is no way a complete nuclear weapon can be plucked from Islamabad's stockpile, which is protected by about 10,000 of the Pakistani military's most elite troops. The guts of the nuclear warhead are kept separate from the rest of the device, and a nuclear detonation is impossible without both pieces. Additionally, the delivery vehicle — plane or missile — is also segregated from the warhead components.

Over the past decade, Pakistan has created the National Command Authority and the Strategic Plans Division to manage the nuclear infrastructure from day to day, and the U.S. has given Pakistan an estimated \$100 million since 9/11 to bolster the security of its arsenal. While much of that has been spent on bringing Pakistani nuclear personnel to the U.S. for training, it has also been spent on hardware, including various surveillance and security systems.

Then, there's the touchy area of "permissive action links" — the electronic "locks" on nuclear weapons that must be "opened" for a nuclear detonation to take place. Washington doesn't share its own PALs with other countries for fear of losing control of the technology and surrendering key elements about U.S. weapons design (although installing PALs on another country's nukes — with a secret "kill" capability that could remotely render the weapons impotent — has always been a tempting option). "Permissive action links are custom-made devices based on the design and configuration of the weapons," former senior Pakistani nuclear official Naeem Salik told TIME 16 months ago. Until late 2005, he had served as director of arms control and disarmament affairs at Pakistan's National Command Authority, created in 1999 as the command and control center for Pakistan's nuclear weapons. "Unless one is willing to share the technical configuration of the weapon, a permissive action link cannot be developed. We did not share these secrets, so we never asked for the permissive action links — our people have developed our own."

That may all be well and good, Mullen seemed to suggest to NBC during a Wednesday interview in Afghanistan, just before he headed across the border to Islamabad. But, he cautioned, it may not be good enough, given the turmoil racking Pakistan. "My long-term worry," Mullen said, "is that descent — should it continue — gives us the worst possible outcome there."

<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1893685,00.html>

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Daily Times – Pakistan
26 April 2009

US Worried about Pakistan's Nukes

Stimson Centre says real concern is what would happen if Pakistan decided to move nuclear weapons closely guarded by army

LAHORE: The Taliban situation in Pakistan is particularly concerning, CNN said on Saturday because Pakistan is a nuclear-armed state.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN nuclear watchdog, it said, believes that Pakistan has 30-40 nuclear warheads. These, however, are unassembled and scattered about Pakistan.

Earlier this week, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned that Pakistan was in danger of falling into terrorist hands. Pakistan's ambassador to the United States, Husain Haqqani, however told CNN the situation was not so dire.

"Yes, we have a challenge," he said. "But, no, we do not have a situation in which the government or the country of Pakistan is about to fall to the Taliban."

Real concern: Michael Krepon of the Stimson Centre think tank, too, said while the news from Pakistan was "disturbing" the real concern was what would happen if Pakistan decided to move the weapons components closely guarded by the army.

"The nuclear weapons are the most well-guarded inanimate objects in the country," he said. "When they're not in motion, they're not going to be subject to hijacking or being overrun by the Taliban."

"If there's a crisis with India ... odds increase greatly that weapons could move, and when weapons move around, it is very worrisome," he said.

Imminent threat: Political consultant Hasan Askari Rizvi said: "The threat to nuclear weapons is not so imminent because they are far away from those places and secondly, they are under control of the army." He said the army would defend their control of the nuclear weapons until the end.

Commentators and politicians in the West have long expressed concerns that Pakistan's nuclear weapons could be stolen.

A month after former prime minister Benazir Bhutto was killed, top Pakistani security officials held a special briefing for Western journalists, insisting that the country's nuclear arsenal was secure.

The news conference took place a few weeks after IAEA chief Mohamed El Baradei warned that Pakistan's "many internal problems" put the country's nuclear arms at greater risk.

At the briefing, Lt-Gen Khalid Kidwai – head of the army division that controls Pakistan's nuclear sites and weapons – said the weapons were protected by a "fool-proof" security system. Kidwai said 10,000 troops, including special agents reporting directly to the intelligence services, were guarding the nuclear facilities. He stressed that Pakistani military sites were equipped with security cameras; biometrics access control; bullet-proof vehicles, high security walls; and quick reaction forces. Around 2,000 scientists working with sensitive materials and information at the sites had to undergo extensive background checks before being given security clearances. daily times monitor

http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2009%5C04%5C26%5Cstory_26-4-2009_pg7_20

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Hindustan Times - India
Indo-Asian News Service
Islamabad, April 27, 2009

Pakistan's Nukes won't Fall to Taliban, Assures Zardari

Pakistan asserted on Monday there was no danger of the Taliban getting hold of its nuclear arsenal and said the country's "nuclear capability was in safe hands". "I want to assure the world that the nuclear capability of Pakistan is under safe hands," APP quoted President Asif Ali Zardari as telling a group of international journalists here.

Allaying fears of a threat to the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons, Zardari said a strong command and control system was fully in place for its nuclear weapons.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had on Saturday voiced concerns over Pakistan's nuclear weapons. "One of our concerns, which we've raised with the Pakistani government and military is that if the worst, the unthinkable

were to happen, and this advancing Taliban encouraged and supported by Al Qaeda and other extremists were to essentially topple the government for failure to beat them back then they would have the keys to the nuclear arsenal of Pakistan,” Clinton told Fox News in an interview in Baghdad.

“We can’t even contemplate that. We cannot, you know, let this go on any further. Which is why we’re pushing so hard for the Pakistanis to come together around a strategy to take their country back,” she maintained.

Earlier this month, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said he had received assurances that Pakistan's nuclear weapons were in safe hands but did not elaborate. “We have been assured that their nuclear assets are in safe hands and I do not want to disbelieve that assurance,” Singh said in Guwahati April 19.

Zardari had ratified a controversial peace deal between the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) government and the Taliban for imposing Sharia laws in Swat and six other districts of the province in return for the militants laying down their arms.

Instead, the Taliban advanced south into the Buner district that is just 100 km from Islamabad.

They later withdrew but the Pakistani Army Saturday moved against the Taliban in the Lower Dir district to the west of Swat, prompting radical cleric Sufi Mohammad who had brokered the peace deal to declare it was off.

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/StoryPage.aspx?sectionName=HomePage&id=c1e38983-4806-45f8-bf66-e89f4a30d9e1&Headline=Pakistan's+nukes+won't+fall+to+Taliban%2c+assures+Zardari>

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Washington Post
April 25, 2009

North Korea says has Started Extracting Plutonium

By Miyoung Kim and Jon Herskovitz
Reuters

SEOUL (Reuters) - North Korea has started to extract plutonium from spent fuel rods at its nuclear arms plant, its foreign ministry said on Saturday, further raising regional tensions already stoked by its defiant rocket launch this month.

The announcement came hours after a U.N. Security Council committee on Friday placed three North Korean companies on a U.N. blacklist for aiding Pyongyang's missile and nuclear programmes, eliciting a sharp rebuke from a North Korean envoy.

Reclusive North Korea has lashed out at being punished for the April 5 launch, widely seen as a disguised long-range missile test that violated U.N. resolutions, saying it would boycott six-way nuclear talks and bolster its nuclear deterrent.

"The reprocessing of spent fuel rods from the pilot atomic power plant began as declared in the Foreign Ministry statement dated April 14," North Korea's official news agency KCNA quoted a foreign ministry spokesman as saying.

"This will contribute to bolstering the nuclear deterrence for self-defense in every way to cope with the increasing military threats from the hostile forces," it said.

In Baghdad, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said the United States would not be "blackmailed" by North Korea.

North Korea struck a deal with China, Japan, Russia, South Korea and the United States to disable its Soviet-era Yongbyon nuclear plant in exchange for massive aid and ending its international ostracism.

It has expelled U.N. and U.S. nuclear inspectors at Yongbyon, located about 100 km (60 miles) north of Pyongyang, who had been overseeing steps to put the entire plant out of operation for at least a year.

Speaking at a news conference in Baghdad, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged North Korea to keep its commitment to abandon its nuclear programmes and said she hoped talks on the matter would soon resume.

"We're not going to be blackmailed by the North Koreans," Clinton later told U.S. broadcaster Fox News in an interview taped in Baghdad.

She said the United States and others would ratchet up sanctions to try to prevent Pyongyang from proliferating its nuclear technology.

"We're going to crack down in conjunction with the Chinese, the Russians, the Japanese, the South Koreans and other allies to try to ... tighten the band around North Korea so that they cannot do that," she told Fox News.

Experts said North Korea, which has enough fissile material for six to eight nuclear bombs, wants to separate plutonium from spent fuel rods cooling at the plant that could yield it enough material for at least one more nuclear bomb.

They also said it could take North Korea, which conducted its only nuclear test in October 2006, as little as three months to have the reprocessing facility up and running again.

Other parts of the Yongbyon plant, which includes a nuclear fuel fabrication facility and a reactor, may be beyond repair, they said.

Market players, used to the North's threats, have mostly ignored the latest developments.

But rebuilding parts of Yongbyon could increase the regional security threat because North Korea could add to its meager stockpile of fissile material, increasing the likelihood that it could conduct another nuclear weapons test.

North Korea will stay away from international nuclear disarmament talks, Russia's foreign minister said on Friday after visiting Pyongyang and pressing North Korea to return to the sputtering discussions.

(Additional reporting by Arshad Mohammed in Baghdad)

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/25/AR2009042500955.html>

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RIA Novosti
25 April 2009

North Korea Restarts Plutonium Production at Yongbyon

SEOUL, April 25 (RIA Novosti) - North Korea said on Saturday it has restarted work at nuclear facilities that produce weapons-grade plutonium following the withdrawal from six-nation talks on its controversial nuclear and missile programs.

North Korea's official KCNA news agency quoted on Saturday the reclusive communist regime's Foreign Ministry spokesman as saying that Pyongyang had restarted a plutonium-producing reactor at Yongbyon, which had been idled under an earlier international agreement.

The official said the move "will contribute to bolstering the nuclear deterrence for self-defense in every way to cope with the increasing military threats from the hostile forces."

According to Russian analysts, it will take up to a year before the North would be able to obtain plutonium from about 8,000 spent fuel rods at the Yongbyon reactor.

Pyongyang's announcement came shortly after a U.N. Security Council committee approved new sanctions against three major North Korean companies - Korea Mining Development Trading Corp., Korea Ryongbong General Corp., and Tanchon Commercial Bank, which are suspected of involvement in ballistic missile transactions.

North Korea withdrew from the six-nation talks on scrapping its nuclear program after the UN Security Council condemned the launch of a rocket on April 5, which Pyongyang said was carrying a communications satellite.

The North has also expelled IAEA and U.S. nuclear inspectors who monitored the disablement of nuclear facilities in the country.

The six-nation talks, involving North and South Korea, Russia, Japan, China and the United States, were launched in 2003 after Pyongyang withdrew from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Under deals reached in 2007, the North began disabling a nuclear reactor and other facilities at Yongbyon under U.S. supervision in exchange for economic aid and political incentives.

However, in December, the latest round of six-party talks resulted in deadlock over a U.S. demand that nuclear inspectors be allowed to take samples out of the country from North Korean facilities for further analysis.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who recently visited Pyongyang, said on Friday that North Korea had no plans to return to six-nation talks, and expressed hope that the situation around North Korea's nuclear and missile programs would not be used as a pretext for the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region.

<http://en.rian.ru/world/20090425/121307114.html>

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China Daily
26 April 2009

US not to Accept DPRK as Nuclear-weapons State

WASHINGTON -- The United States will not accept the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) as a nuclear-armed country, State Department spokeswoman Megan Mattson said here on Saturday.

"We will not accept North Korea as a nuclear-weapons state," Mattson told reporters hours after Pyongyang announced it had reactivated facilities to harvest plutonium.

"The United States remains committed to the six-party goal of the complete and verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner through the six-party talks," the spokeswoman said.

The United States will "seek full implementation of the Sept. 19, 2005 Joint Statement under which North Korea committed to abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and return, at an early date, to the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to IAEA safeguards," she added.

Also on Saturday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reiterated in Baghdad, Iraq that the United States remains hoping to continue talks with the DPRK over its nuclear issues.

The six-party talks, involving the DPRK, the United States, China, the Republic of Korea, Japan and Russia, were first held in Beijing, China in August 2003, and have made tangible progress on the issue in the following years.

The DPRK destroyed the cooling tower at its Yongbyon nuclear complex in June 2008, marking a symbolic step forward toward the goal of denuclearization.

http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2009-04/26/content_7716999.htm

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Yonhap News
27 April 2009

S. Korea to Urge N. Korea to Rejoin NPT in Upcoming International Meeting

By Lee Chi-dong

SEOUL, April 27 (Yonhap) -- South Korea plans to reiterate its call for North Korea to return to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) during a major international meeting early next month, officials here said Monday.

South Korea will send Oh Joon, deputy foreign minister for international organization, global issues and treaties, to the Third Preparatory Conference for parties to the NPT to be held in New York from May 4-15, they added.

"Deputy Minister Oh will call for North Korea to rejoin the NPT in his keynote speech during the session," a ministry official said on the condition of anonymity.

North Korea declared withdrawal from the NPT in 2003.

Moon Tae-young, ministry spokesman, said earlier in the day the forthcoming NPT meeting is meaningful as it comes as U.S. President Barack Obama seeks to bolster the regime which many observers say was weakened during the Bush administration.

"It is the first NPT meeting since the launch of the Obama administration," Moon said in a press briefing. "It is notable that the meeting takes place amid growing global interest in disarmament and nonproliferation."

Oh is scheduled to meet with Rose Gottemoeller, U.S. assistant secretary of state for verification and compliance, on the sidelines of the meeting, added Moon.

<http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2009/04/27/15/0401000000AEN20090427005500315F.HTML>

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New York Times

April 27, 2009

Iran Preparing Response to Nuclear Talks Offer

By ELISABETH BUMILLER

WASHINGTON — President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran promised on Sunday that he would make “public as soon as possible” his country’s response to an Obama administration offer of talks with Iran and other nations about Tehran’s nuclear program, but an administration official reacted with skepticism.

In an interview in Tehran broadcast Sunday on “This Week” on ABC, he said that Iran was preparing a new package of proposals in response to an administration offer this month to talk directly with the country and other powers seeking to rein in Tehran’s nuclear ambitions.

Last August, the Bush administration rejected an Iranian proposal because it ignored the West’s demand that Iran suspend its enrichment of uranium as a precondition for talks. Since then, the Obama administration and its European allies have begun to consider dropping the American insistence that Tehran shut down its nuclear facilities in the early stage of any talks.

“Everyone knows that in this year many changes, developments have unfolded on the international stage,” Mr. Ahmadinejad said in the interview. “Many new issues have been added to the agenda, so to speak.”

He declined to elaborate on the contents of his proposal.

But an administration official, responding later on Sunday to Mr. Ahmadinejad’s comments, said, “I would guess that what we are going to see is something similar to what we saw before, with a few changes here and there.” The official spoke on the condition of anonymity because he did not want to be seen as prejudging Iran’s proposal.

Mr. Ahmadinejad also said that though President Obama had talked about an American-Iranian relationship in which past divisions were overcome, it was difficult for his country to forget decades of history.

“In the past 29 years, different U.S. administrations have opposed the Iranian people,” Mr. Ahmadinejad said. “Now they say that we have given up that enmity. That’s fine. We have welcomed such comments. But an administration which, up until yesterday, was saying that I’m going to kill you, and today says that I’m not going to kill you, is that sufficient?”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/27/world/middleeast/27iran.html?ref=global-home>

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Daily Yomiuri – Japan

27 April 2009

U.S. said Studying Ground-Based SM-3 Missile System

Satoshi Ogawa / Yomiuri Shimbun Correspondent

WASHINGTON--The U.S. Defense Department's Missile Defense Agency (MDA) has started studying a new missile defense system capable of launching the Standard Missile-3 from the ground, it was learned Saturday.

The SM-3 is an antiballistic missile system currently deployed on the Aegis-equipped destroyer.

The current missile system offers a two-part defense--the Aegis destroyer-based SM-3 missile system and the Patriot Advanced Capability 3 (PAC-3) system, in which missiles are launched from the ground.

Under the system, if SM-3s fail to shoot down a missile down above the atmosphere, PAC-3 missiles are launched to intercept incoming missiles nearer the ground.

SM-3s, which can hit targets within a radius of about 500 kilometers, have a much longer range than the PAC-3, with a range of about 10 kilometers.

However, in an effort to make better use of SM-3s, the new system being considered would allow missiles to be launched from both the ground and the sea at the initial intercept stage, sources said.

Prior to North Korea's missile launch on April 5, which it claimed was to place a communications satellite in orbit, the country notified the international community of its intentions, prompting the Japanese government to dispatch two Aegis destroyers to the Sea of Japan.

Analysts note that North Korea's Rodong missile launch system is mobile, meaning it might not always be possible to have Aegis destroyers in place quickly enough. However, the new system would make it possible to intercept a missile at an early stage, even if Aegis destroyers had not been deployed.

The MDA has recently developed technology that would allow a system that combines antiballistic missiles such as SM-3s with various radar networks used in other systems.

<http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/world/20090427TDY01302.htm>

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Global Security Newswire
April 27, 2009

Airborne Laser Aircraft Completes Flight Test

A modified Boeing 747-400F jumbo jet aircraft on Tuesday completed its first flight test since being fully equipped with an experimental missile defense laser, the U.S. Missile Defense Agency announced (see *GSN*, Dec. 12, 2008).

In an upcoming series of tests, the Airborne Laser aircraft is expected to pick up, monitor, target and fire on increasingly challenging targets. In a final test planned for later this year, the aircraft would attempt to destroy a mock enemy ballistic missile in its boost phase (U.S. Missile Defense Agency release, April 24).

"With ABL's return to flight, we are on the verge of fully demonstrating the unprecedented speed, mobility, precision and lethality that ABL could provide to America's warfighters," Michael Rinn, Airborne Laser program director at defense contractor Boeing, said in a statement.

By using the aircraft to destroying an enemy missile early in flight, the United States could avoid taking unnecessary shots with other missile defense systems, according to Boeing. The Airborne Laser is one of the missile defense programs facing budget cuts in the fiscal 2010 Defense Department budget (see *GSN*, April 6; Boeing release, April 24).

http://www.globalsecuritynewswire.org/gsn/nw_20090427_8161.php

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Washington Post
April 27, 2009

Bin Laden could be Dead, Whereabouts Unknown: Zardari

Reuters

ISLAMABAD (Reuters) - Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari said on Monday that the whereabouts of al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden remained a mystery and there was a suspicion that he could be dead.

Speaking to international media, Zardari said U.S. officials had told him that they had no trace of the al Qaeda chief, although they habitually say he is most likely in Pakistan.

Pakistan's own intelligence agencies were no wiser, either, Zardari said.

"There is no news," the president said. "They obviously feel that he does not exist anymore but that's not confirmed, we can't confirm that."

Al Jazeera aired excerpts of an audio recording in March in which the speaker's voice sounded like earlier messages from bin Laden, who has eluded all efforts to catch him since al Qaeda carried out the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

Bin Laden, if he is still alive, turned 52 on March 10, but he is known to suffer from ill-health.

There have been reports that he had died of natural causes in the past, but they have never been corroborated, and security analysts believe intelligence agencies monitoring jihadi websites on the Internet would have picked up some chatter.

(Reporting by Zeeshan Haider; Editing by Simon Cameron-Moore and Dean Yates)

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/27/AR2009042700699.html>

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USA Today
27 April 2009

Why is Outbreak Hitting Mexico Harder?

By Rita Rubin, USA TODAY

So far, only Mexico has reported deaths of people with laboratory-confirmed swine flu, but the disease isn't necessarily more severe in that country than elsewhere, U.S. scientists said Monday.

"There's so much unknown at this point," notes Joan Nichols of the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston's Center for Biodefense and Emerging Infectious Diseases.

The Associated Press quotes Mexico's health secretary saying the country confirmed 20 deaths linked to swine flu. (The World Health Organization puts lab-confirmed deaths at seven.) The USA has had 40 confirmed cases and no deaths.

But Mexico is reporting nearly 2,000 suspected cases and, AP says, up to 149 suspected deaths. Perhaps swine flu seems to be more lethal there because it has cut a wider swath, says William Schaffner, infectious-diseases chair at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. "Until we get more information, we won't be able to put our arms around it," he says.

In particular, he says, he'd like to know the ages of swine flu victims who died. If they tended to be old, they might have had underlying ailments, such as heart or lung disease, that increased the risk of complications.

"There are always a lot of variables when you talk about transmission of disease," says Dan Hinthorn, director of infectious diseases at the University of Kansas Hospital in Kansas City.

Mexican officials are reporting a swine flu death rate approaching the 8% to 10% death rate from SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome, which struck Southeast Asia and Canada in 2003), Hinthorn says. But, he speculates, perhaps many more Mexicans actually have had swine flu than health officials realize because their illness was milder and they never saw a doctor. If so, he says, the death rate could be far lower.

Julio Frenk, new dean of the Harvard School of Public Health, served as Mexico's health minister from 2000 to 2006. He talked from Mexico City, where he was visiting family. "I think the epidemiologists here are very, very competent and very committed to timely, transparent reporting," Frenk said, noting that he was speaking as a knowledgeable "external observer." "Obviously, some of the information takes time."

For now, he says, Mexican officials' top priority is to contain the swine flu outbreak and take care of people who are sick. Whether it is causing more severe disease in Mexico than elsewhere "needs to be answered through research," Frenk says.

Initial numbers show that previously healthy people ages 25-45 make up the largest number of reported Mexican swine flu cases, he says — roughly the same age group hardest hit in the 1918 flu pandemic.

http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2009-04-27-swine-flu-mexico_N.htm

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Washington Post
April 27, 2009

Key Posts Remain Vacant as Untested Pandemic Response Plan Implemented

By Michael D. Shear and Spencer S. Hsu
Washington Post Staff Writers

As they confront the growing swine flu crisis, President Obama's administration is attempting to implement a never-before-tested pandemic response plan while dozens of key public health and emergency response jobs in the administration remain vacant.

The president has yet to fill 15 top positions at the health department or name a full-time director for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and five more nominations -- including that of former Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius to be HHS Secretary -- are waiting to be confirmed by the Senate, officials at the department said.

The top post at the CDC remains open but is being filled by an acting director. And at the Department of Homeland Security, which is leading the federal government's response to the swine flu outbreak, the functions of nearly 20 senior-level posts are being temporarily performed by career civil service employees.

The government's medical response is being coordinated by a temporary team including acting CDC director Richard E. Besser, acting HHS secretary Charles Johnson, a Bush assistant secretary previously approved by the Senate, and Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response Rear Adm. W. Craig Vanderwagen, another Senate-confirmed holdover.

"Having the top 20 unfilled is a significant problem for the long term," said Michael Leavitt, the HHS Secretary under President Bush. He praised the work of the civil servants, but said the Obama administration "needs to give this priority. Vetted people need to be sent to the Senate. And the Senate needs to respond."

An immediate pandemic outbreak would pose immense challenges to a presidential team operating without much experience and without a long-standing plan. A National Pandemic Strategy and Implementation Plan was developed in 2005 and 2006, but has never been fully tested.

In some ways, such a scenario would combine the test posed by the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, which occurred eight months into the administration of former president George W. Bush at a time when many key Justice Department and intelligence positions were vacant, and Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, which struck just one year after a national response plan was overhauled.

"The fact is it didn't measure up," former Bush homeland security advisor Frances Fragos Townsend said in a Feb. 2006 review of the Katrina response, saying the confusing and overly bureaucratic National Response Plan "came up short."

Leavitt, who led the government's development of the pandemic plan following an avian flu outbreak in 2005, said the crisis needs to be managed at the federal level by health professionals, not homeland security officials.

"Without a Secretary of HHS, this will begin to be managed in ways that will be inconsistent with its nature," he warned in an interview Monday. "If you were managing this out of Commerce, it would all be about trade. If it were Treasury, it would all be about the flow of money."

White House officials dismissed questions Monday about the team confronting the potential pandemic. Press Secretary Robert Gibbs told reporters that he is confident that the administration is ready to handle the crisis.

"Our response is in no way hindered or hampered by not having a permanent secretary at HHS right now," Gibbs said. "Dr. Besser and thousands of people both at CDC and throughout HHS are responding to this . . . We feel confident with the team that is there now."

At the Department of Homeland Security, only two of 21 top political appointees have been confirmed by the Senate -- Secretary Janet Napolitano and her deputy, Jane Holl Lute.

Vacant positions include the department's assistant secretary for health affairs and chief medical officer, and the leaders of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Transportation Security Administration and U.S. Customs and Border Protection, all of which would play significant roles in battling a pandemic.

Napolitano played down concerns about the empty seats in key positions, saying those roles are being filled by career civil servants "who have a great deal of experience. As far as I'm concerned the process, the work has been moving very smoothly and with great efficiency. And so I think we're moving right along."

Napolitano has taken charge as the Principal Federal Official in charge of the domestic response, even though under the national pandemic plan developed in 2006, a subordinate was predesignated to serve as the government pandemic response coordinator, U.S. Coast Guard Vice Commandant Vivien S. Crea. Likewise, FEMA has named principal and coordinating officers to respond to a pandemic outbreak in five regions, but they also have not yet been activated.

A senior HHS official said the department has been able to do its job with 40 appointees who are not subject to Senate confirmation and career staffers, and is trying to stay "two to three steps ahead" of the unfolding situation.

For instance, officials on Sunday announced that they were deploying one-fourth of the antiviral drugs in the Strategic National Stockpile, beginning with states with confirmed cases and border states. On Monday they announced that all states would be given access and the entire stockpile would be depleted in seven days, by May 3.

HHS also announced that the Food and Drug Administration is working with CDC to waive regulatory limits to push out a swine flu diagnostic test to state and local public health laboratories by mid-week. Napolitano announced that the government will allow FDA to permit the distribution of drugs such as Tamiflu to populations they normally wouldn't, such as very young children. The latter two steps were made possible by Sunday's declaration of a national health emergency.

Napolitano said the U.S. government was preparing as if a full pandemic will be declared by the World Health Organization. "We are proceeding as if we are preparatory to a full pandemic," Napolitano said. "We don't know that a pandemic actually will occur, but because we want to make sure that we have equipment where it needs to be, people where they need to be and, most important, information shared at all levels."

Washingtonpost.com staff writer Ed O'Keefe contributed to this report.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/27/AR2009042703060.html?hpid=topnews>

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Daily Guardian

28 April 2009

Swine Flu Unstoppable, WHO Warns

Peter Walker and Rachel Williams

The World Health Organisation warned today that swine flu can no longer be contained, as the virus spread to Asia and the Middle East, with the first cases confirmed in New Zealand and Israel.

The virus, an apparently new strain of the H1N1 flu, has now been confirmed in seven countries, and suspected outbreaks are being investigated in other places including Ireland, Germany, Italy, Sweden and Denmark.

The world was now at a "turning period", said Gregory Hartl, a WHO spokesman, where it would soon become clear whether the virus was capable of the kind of sustained, large-scale movement between humans that would bring a full pandemic a step closer. So far transmission within communities had been seen only in Mexico and the US, he said.

The WHO's deputy head, Keiji Fukuda, warned countries to consider urgently how best to deal with a possible mass outbreak, given that closing international borders would have little impact now. "At this time containment is not a feasible option," he said.

As the UK advised against all but essential travel to Mexico, and some travel firms began cancelling flights from tourist resorts, a spokesman for NHS Direct said the advice line had received almost 1,400 calls about suspected swine flu cases and had referred 238 callers who had travelled to infected areas and were showing potential symptoms of the virus to their GPs over the past 24 hours. Separately, the Wiltshire primary care trust said seven people from the county were being tested for suspected swine flu at a Health Protection Agency facility in Bristol, with results expected later today.

The WHO's emergency committee last night raised its pandemic threat level to phase four of a possible six, after the death toll in Mexico, where the outbreak was first identified, rose to 152, with nearly 2,000 people believed to be infected. Phase four means the risk of a pandemic is much higher but not yet inevitable.

Gordon Brown, who later today will join a meeting of the government's Cobra emergency committee, chaired by the health secretary, Alan Johnson, called for concerted global action to combat the virus.

"Swine flu is an international problem now. It is across two continents," the prime minister said during a visit to Poland.

The European commission is to hold a meeting with representatives from the pharmaceutical industry tomorrow to discuss how a vaccine might be produced, the EU health commissioner, Androulla Vassiliou, said in Brussels. It could take between four and six months to produce a vaccine, although anti-flu drugs already available appear to be at least partly effective in treating symptoms.

While there were currently confirmed cases only in the UK and in Spain, outbreaks were suspected in seven other EU nations, Vassiliou said. "We expect the situation to change in the course of the next few days. No one should underestimate the situation but there is no need to panic either."

Vassiliou added that she thought the use of the term swine flu misleading and potentially harmful to pork producers; the virus should be renamed "novel flu", she said.

The 11 cases in New Zealand, among students and teachers from a single school who reported fevers and other flu symptoms on return from a visit to Mexico, are the first in the Asia-Pacific region.

A 26-year-old patient in Netanya, a coastal city north of Tel Aviv in Israel, was infected but was said to have recovered fully.

As some UK holiday companies offered refunds or alternative destinations to travellers already booked on to trips to Mexico, the Foreign Office advised British citizens living in Mexico to "consider whether they should remain". Shares in travel companies and airlines fell again today in London. Thomson and First Choice holidays are flying out empty planes from Manchester and Gatwick to bring back holidaymakers.

Spain confirmed a second case of a patient with swine flu today and South Korea said a woman there had tested positive for the virus, making her a probable case.

Health officials in Ireland said a total of six people in the country were now being tested for possible exposure to the virus, which is a combination of pig, bird and human flu strains to which humans may have no natural immunity. Symptoms include a high fever and headache, coughing, joint ache and, in some cases, vomiting and diarrhoea. All the deaths reported thus far have been in Mexico, where victims have tended to be in their 30s or 40s rather than the very young or old, as is the case with usual flu strains.

A Scottish couple suffering from swine flu, from Polmont near Falkirk, had been in Mexico on honeymoon in Cancún. According to the WHO, it is still unclear whether Iain and Dawn Askham were both infected in Mexico or whether one had infected the other.

About 22 friends, family and colleagues who had close contact with them were being observed and given antiviral drugs. Seven of these were showing "mild symptoms" of the illness. The group being monitored reportedly includes a five-year-old child.

Last night the Scottish health secretary, Nicola Sturgeon, said the couple were recovering well at Monklands hospital in Airdrie, Lanarkshire.

UK ministers say the country is well prepared for a possible pandemic, with Johnson telling MPs the country had a stock of 33m courses of anti-flu drugs.

If the situation deteriorates plans are in place for the government to warn the entire population to set up a support network of friends and relatives so they can be quickly quarantined at home if they are thought to have symptoms. The friends would collect medicine on their behalf.

In Mexico the country's health secretary, José Ángel Córdova, has said he expects more people to die. Nearly 2,000 people had been treated in hospital for suspected infection, he said. Half of them had been released.

Córdova admitted that the health authorities lacked the staff to check on all suspected cases. Some foreign health officials fear such difficulties may be contributing to the disease's spread.

He stressed that it was not confirmed the outbreak had begun in Mexico and indicated that it could have first emerged in the US, where health officials believe the virus was spotted in late March.

In New York the number of confirmed cases among students at a school rose to 28, with more than 100 suspected. That brought the number of confirmed cases in the US to 42 in five states, twice as many as reported at the weekend.

Peru and Guatemala reported the first suspected infections in other parts of Latin America, where health officials fear swine flu has already spread but has so far gone undetected.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/apr/28/swine-flu-mexico-scotland>

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New York Times
April 28, 2009

W.H.O. Issues Higher Alert on Swine Flu, With Advice

By DONALD G. McNEIL Jr.

While confirmed cases of swine flu increased only slightly on Monday, the World Health Organization voted to raise its global pandemic flu alert level, but at the same time it recommended that borders not be closed nor travel bans imposed.

The W.H.O.'s emergency committee, after meeting until 10:30 p.m. in Geneva, also recommended abandoning efforts to contain the flu's spread.

"Because the virus is already quite widespread in different locations, containment is not a feasible option," said Dr. Keiji Fukuda, the organization's deputy director general.

The W.H.O. also recommended that vaccine makers keep making the seasonal flu vaccine instead of switching over to a new one that matches the swine flu strain, but it urged them to start the process of picking a pandemic strain, weakening it and making large batches of it, which could take six months.

Dr. Fukuda emphasized that the committee thought that "a pandemic is not inevitable — the situation is fluid and will continue to evolve."

In Mexico, where the only related deaths have been reported, state health authorities looking for the initial source of the outbreak toured a million-pig hog farm in Perote, in Veracruz State. The plant is half-owned by Smithfield Foods, an American company and the world's largest pork producer.

Mexico's first known swine flu case, which was later confirmed, was from Perote, according to Health Minister José Ángel Córdova. The case involved a 5-year-old boy who recovered.

But a spokesman for the plant said the boy was not related to a plant worker, that none of its workers were sick and that its hogs were vaccinated against flu.

American officials said their response to the epidemic was already aggressive, and the W.H.O.'s decision to raise its pandemic alert to level 4 from level 3 would not change their plans. Level 4 means that there has been sustained human-to-human transmission.

The W.H.O. decision offered some official guidance to a world that, at least for the day, seemed swept by confusion that unnerved international travelers and the financial markets. European and Asian markets fell, and stock in airlines and the travel industry fell while those in pharmaceutical companies rose.

Pharmacies in New York reported runs on Tamiflu, an anti-flu drug — a reaction that public health officials badly want to avoid because the drug could eventually be needed for the truly ill.

For now supplies of Tamiflu and Relenza, another anti-flu drug, remain adequate, the manufacturers said, but both were increasing production and expressed anxiety that shortages could develop if governments placed huge orders.

The travel issue was the most confusing. On Monday morning, the European Union appeared to issue and then rescind a ban on travel to the United States, drawing a rebuke from American officials, who themselves later suggested that Americans drop all nonessential travel to Mexico.

The number of deaths in Mexico for which flu is believed responsible climbed to 149. That includes 20 in which the swine flu virus has been confirmed as the cause.

The number of confirmed cases of the virus in the United States increased to 50, with 28 of them from one New York City school. None of the American cases have been serious, but Dr. Richard Besser, acting director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said he “would not rest on that fact.”

“I expect that we will see additional cases, and I expect that the spectrum of disease will expand,” he said at a news conference.

Asked why the W.H.O. had waited so long to raise its alert level, Dr. Fukuda said it was done on technical grounds, that there was evidence of sustained human-to-human transmission of a new virus and movement of that virus to new areas. But he conceded that “the committee is very aware that changes have quite significant political and economic effects on countries.”

The W.H.O. has no power to enforce any policies on member states, but different countries may have their own pandemic flu plans that are triggered by changes in the alert level.

Spain and Scotland became the first places outside North America to confirm cases. Suspected cases appeared in Brazil, Australia, Israel and New Zealand, but confirmation is slow because most nations’ laboratories lack the test kit the C.D.C. is developing for the new virus.

The C.D.C. began sending out the new kits on Monday, meaning that soon some states and foreign countries will be able to make their own diagnoses — a development that could lead to a sharp increase in confirmed cases.

Confusion regarding Europe’s position on travel arose when the European Union’s health commissioner, Androulla Vassiliou, was questioned on a visit to Luxembourg and said Europeans “should avoid traveling to Mexico or the United States unless it’s very urgent.”

Early reports of those remarks led both Dr. Besser and Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg of New York City to publicly disagree.

“We don’t think there is any reason not to travel and come to New York,” the mayor said. “But they have to do what they think is right.”

Ms. Vassiliou’s office later denied she had issued any travel advisory and said she was only offering her personal opinion. “She didn’t want to insinuate risk where we’re not sure,” a spokesman said, adding that formal advice would be offered later.

Mayor Bloomberg confirmed that there were now 28 cases in New York, all connected to St. Francis Preparatory School in Fresh Meadows, Queens. He said there had been no suspected cases in any of the city’s intensive-care units. He acknowledged an increase in emergency-room visits, but he said his preliminary information indicated that there were more people who were worried rather than seriously ill.

New York’s public health situation does not now resemble Mexico City’s, the mayor said, and the public does not need to don masks.

In Europe, a spokesman for the Stockholm-based European Center for Disease Prevention and Control said there were about 40 suspected cases beyond the confirmed case in Spain.

The United States pork industry continued to try to allay consumer concerns about their products. Many companies and hog farmers complained that the “swine flu” name was unfortunate and perhaps inaccurate because, so far, the virus appeared to be spreading without any contact with pigs.

“I guess everything has got to have a name,” said Kyle Stephens, who raises show pigs in Amarillo, Tex. “The biggest thing we are up against is people thinking the worst, instead of checking into it more.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/28/health/28flu.html?ref=europe>

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Wall Street Journal
OPINION
28 April 2009

How Bush Prepared for the Outbreak

By TEVI TROY

Swine flu has presented the Obama administration with its first major public-health crisis. Fortunately for the Obama team, the Bush administration developed new tools that will prove critical in meeting this challenge.

Under President Bush, the federal government worked with manufacturers to accelerate vaccine development, stockpiled crucial antivirals like Tamiflu, war-gamed pandemic scenarios with senior officials, and increased the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) sample identification capabilities. These activities are bearing fruit today.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has already deployed 12.5 million courses of antivirals -- out of a total of 50 million -- to states and local agencies. In addition, CDC's new capacities have allowed Mexican officials to send flu samples to CDC for quick identification, a capability that did not exist a few years ago. Collaboration between the government and the private sector on vaccines -- which Mr. Bush and his HHS team actively encouraged -- could potentially allow manufacturers to shepherd a vaccine to market within four months of identifying the strain and getting the go-ahead from CDC or the World Health Organization.

But new tools aside, top health officials must answer difficult questions about response efforts. One is when and where to deploy antivirals.

The Bush administration considered a "forest fire" approach to pandemic outbreaks abroad. This strategy calls for sharing some of our precious supply of antivirals with a foreign country in order to stop a small flame from becoming a forest fire. The risk is that we have only a limited number of courses, and the use of antivirals increases the odds that the flu strain in question will become resistant to that antiviral. With 37.5 million courses remaining in the federal stockpile, the administration needs to think very carefully about how to use them.

Another issue: Under the Public Readiness and Emergency Preparedness (PREP) Act of 2006, the government has the authority to issue "Prep Act Declarations" granting liability protection to manufacturers whose products were used in public-health emergencies. This helps encourage manufacturers to develop countermeasures. The government issued a series of such declarations in 2007 and 2008. They protected the development and use of influenza vaccines and pandemic antivirals, as well as anthrax, smallpox and botulism products. The Obama administration should consider granting more of them -- if appropriate -- in the weeks ahead.

A third policy question has to do with how to stop the spread of the disease both across borders and within countries. The administration has so far initiated "passive surveillance": Border guards are assessing if people entering the U.S. seem sick, but aren't actively stopping anyone. If things get worse, they may have to intensify border security.

The Bush administration examined the question of closing the borders in certain circumstances but determined that it would probably be ineffective. Worse, it could lead other nations to retaliate by closing their own borders, which could hurt Americans traveling abroad.

Another strategy, already in use to some degree in Mexico, is social distancing -- asking citizens to refrain from large social gatherings. During the 1918 influenza pandemic, St. Louis embraced such measures while Philadelphia eschewed them, and Philadelphia suffered a much higher death rate as a result. We are probably not yet at the point where such drastic measures are necessary, but senior officials had better start thinking about how they would address these questions.

Most importantly, the federal government must figure out how to reassure a nervous public. It doesn't help that none of the 20 top officials at HHS has been confirmed. Some of them, like FDA commissioner-designate Dr. Margaret Hamburg, are experts in biopreparedness and could help reassure Americans. Alas, she and her potential future colleagues, including the new secretary of HHS, are still in limbo. They need to be in place and on the job.

Mr. Troy, deputy secretary of Health and Human Services from 2007 to 2009, is a visiting senior fellow at the Hudson Institute.

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124087436467761251.html?mod=googlenews_wsj

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