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International Herald Tribune

May 10, 2008

Tempting Targets

By Bennett Ramberg

For months Washington officials remained silent. They would not discuss Israel's Sept. 6, 2007 strike on Syria's suspect nuclear site.

Then, on April 29, following secret congressional intelligence briefings, President George W. Bush spoke out at a news conference. "We were concerned that an early disclosure would increase the risk of a confrontation or retaliation in the Middle East," he said.

He added that the administration elected to release information now because it "felt the risk of retaliation . . . was reduced."

The emphasis on "retaliation" should have prompted a follow-up question from the White House press corps. What retaliation so worried Washington and, indeed, Jerusalem, that they remained mum for so many months?

Looking back, a little-noticed November 2007 article in the London Sunday Times article provided an inkling. It reported something unusual: Israel had gone on "red alert" to protect the one asset that would mark the target for a retaliatory tit-for-tat, the country's nuclear weapons reactor at Dimona.

But the Times failed to grasp the full implications. Situated in a relatively remote corner of the Negev desert, Dimona is the heart of Israel's atomic weapons program. During its 40-plus years of operation, it has produced plutonium for upwards of 200 nuclear weapons. But while the installation promotes nuclear deterrence, it also offers Israel's adversaries a weapon of their own, a radiological sitting duck.

History provides grounds for concern. In the 1960s, Egypt contemplated attacking the plant. In 1991, in the heat of the Persian Gulf war, Saddam Hussein launched several rockets at Dimona, one of which nearly hit the mark. In 2004, Iranian officials announced that the reactor was in their cross hairs; in 2007, Syria made the same announcement.

Such threats take place against a regional military tapestry that has established atomic plants as fair game. During the 1980s Iraq-Iraq war, the combatants attacked reactors under construction. In 1981, Israel destroyed Saddam's Osirak reactor. At the outset of the 1991 Persian Gulf war, American warplanes struck an Iraqi research reactor outside Baghdad followed, in 2003, by Washington's invasion of Iraq, purportedly to ferret out all WMD.

In no case did strikes release radioactive elements into the environment. But because Dimona is an operating atomic facility, a successful assault today would be different.

Recognizing the risk, Israel long ago took a number of steps. In addition to locating the installation as far as possible from major population centers, it placed reprocessing and weapons assembly facilities in deep underground bunkered cells. It further ringed the plant with anti-aircraft and, later, missile defenses.

Still, there remains the peril that adversaries could defeat these defenses in ballistic and cruise-missile strikes, lifting the reactor's radioactive contents into the environment.

Dimona is no Chernobyl. It generates less than five percent of the ill-fated Soviet reactor's power and its radioactive inventory reflects its small size.

Computer modeling suggests that were prevailing winter winds to push the radioactive plume into the West Bank, the contamination could generate hundreds of cancers.

In the late fall, seasonal weather could carry light radioactive concentrations over Israel's heavily populated coastal communities. Although health risks would be very low outside the immediate vicinity of the installation, concerns nonetheless could generate costly economic dislocations and, like Chernobyl, significant and lingering public anxiety over health impacts.

Then there is the matter of retribution. A successful attack by Iran, for example, could prompt the Israeli public to demand a response in kind. Although the Persian state is building a Dimona-like reactor in Arak, if Jerusalem was bent on inflicting radiological revenge, its forces would go after the Bushehr nuclear power plant which Tehran plans to open later this year or next.

Once the plant has operated for a period of time and built up a radioactive inventory, the consequences of a strike could rival the 1986 Chernobyl accident. But prevailing northerly winds would drive much of the effluent into the thinly populated south.

With a number of Middle East countries planning to build similar nuclear power plants in the decade ahead, discouraging military assaults - at least against active reactors - should be a priority for all. The 1990 Indo-Pakistan agreement forbidding attacks on nuclear facilities provides a model.

But Israel, which finds itself in a vulnerable place today, has another option. It can close Dimona.

The plant, one of the world's oldest, has generated all the nuclear material military planners plausibly could use. In addition, closure would set a nonproliferation standard for the Middle East - no more dedicated nuclear weapons reactors, a goal that would enhance Jerusalem's security.

In so doing, it would eliminate the radiological specter that, since September 2007, kept - and should still keep - Jerusalem and its Washington ally up at night.

Bennett Ramberg, who served in the State Department in the George H. W. Bush administration, is the author of "Nuclear Power Plants as Weapons for the Enemy."

<http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/05/09/opinion/edramberg.php>

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Washington Post

May 11, 2008

Pg. 18

Purchases Linked N. Korean To Syria

Pyeongyang Company Funneled Reactor Parts to Damascus, Intelligence Officials Say

By Robin Wright and Joby Warrick, Washington Post Staff Writers

When North Korean businessman Ho Jin Yun first caught the attention of German customs police in 2002, he was on a continental buying spree with a shopping list that seemed as random as it was long.

Yun, police discovered, had been crisscrossing Central Europe, amassing a bafflingly diverse collection of materials and high-tech gadgets: gas masks, electric timers, steel pipes, vacuum pumps, transformers and aluminum tubes cut to precise dimensions.

Most of these wares Yun had shipped to his company's offices in China and North Korea. But some of the goods, U.S. and European officials now say, were evidently intended for a secret project in Syria: a nuclear reactor that would be built with North Korean help, allegedly to produce plutonium for eventual use in nuclear weapons. According to U.S. officials, European intelligence officials and diplomats, Yun's firm -- Namchongang Trading, known as NCG -- provided the critical link between Pyongyang and Damascus, acquiring key materials from vendors in China and probably from Europe, and secretly transferring them to a desert construction site near the Syrian town of Al Kibar.

It was the company's suspicious buying habits -- and the branch office it opened in Damascus -- that inadvertently contributed to the alleged reactor's discovery and later destruction in a Sept. 6 Israeli bombing raid, U.S. officials say. Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Michael Mullen declined in an interview to say whether Washington helped with the raid, but he strongly endorsed it.

"The reactor which was being built was not very far from being operational and needed to be hit," Mullen said. Alerted to NCG's suspect purchases in Europe, Western spy agencies were able to track the movement of NCG employees and purchases to Syria in 2003, where the outlines of the reactor scheme eventually became apparent. The site was closely scrutinized by Western intelligence officials for months before it was destroyed by Israel. During that period, U.S. officials collected aerial images and acquired interior photos that showed apparent reactor components.

Syria has maintained that the facility was always nonnuclear, but U.S. officials say that as the government cleared the site of debris after the bombing, some telltale reactor components that had been deliberately hidden became visible.

"We judged that these interactions were probably nuclear-related . . . because of who it was we were seeing in those interactions," a senior U.S. intelligence official said at a briefing in Washington last week about the Syrian-North Korean venture. "We assessed the cooperation involved work sites probably within Syria. But again, we didn't know exactly where."

Attempts to contact Yun and other NCG officials by phone and e-mail were unsuccessful.

Syria acknowledges "a working relationship" with North Korea, but Syrian Embassy spokesman Ahmed Salkini said it does not defy any international law. "If this company conducts business with Syria, the terms of transactions would abide by, and would be within, the legal framework of the international community," he said, adding that the embassy has not heard of NCG.

U.S. officials say the Pyongyang-based NCG used an office in Beijing as a base for procuring materials and as a distribution center for items that could not be legally routed through North Korea because of trade sanctions.

A spokesperson at the Chinese Embassy denied any knowledge of the company and its activities.

"I am not aware of anything about the North Korean company mentioned. . . . China is steadfastly opposed to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and its deliveries, and it has been faithfully honoring its international obligations and responsibilities," Wang Baodong said in an e-mailed statement.

Proliferation experts say NCG used many methods to conceal the intended use of the items it was acquiring.

NCG has acted "as a trading agent or middleman, buying items through Chinese trading companies or directly from foreign companies," said David Albright, president of the Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security and an expert on the international black market for nuclear technology.

Because of its branch office in China, NCG can buy equipment from suppliers throughout the world, even in Europe and possibly in the United States, particularly if the companies have subsidiaries in China, Albright said. Moreover, export controls in China are poorly implemented and simple to evade.

Other North Korean companies with offices outside the country have bought militarily sensitive equipment from commercial vendors, including parts for making ballistic missiles, nuclear bombs and other advanced weapons, U.S. officials say. Over the years, they have bought metals used in uranium enrichment and chemical precursors for highly lethal nerve agents, the officials said.

"North Korea often works through these trading companies, which facilitate business deals and other activities overseas that earn foreign exchange for the government and especially for the top leadership. They have been very active in the past in facilitating missile sales in countries like Syria and Iran," said Larry Niksch, an expert on Asia at the Congressional Research Service.

A U.S. counterproliferation official said in an interview that North Korea typically uses "one, two or more layers" of front companies so it can plausibly deny knowledge of actual intended use. "Sometimes they can fool the supplier by saying the goods are intended for another country altogether. North Korea does this very well," said the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because U.S. investigations remain classified.

Over the past decade, NCG's activities have been the target of investigations spanning two continents. Its attempt to purchase hundreds of high-strength tubes from European businesses attracted the attention of the German government in 2003. The tubes were made of a highly specialized type of aluminum used in making centrifuges for uranium enrichment, but Yun, the NCG businessman, told German companies that they were destined for an aircraft factory in China, according to court documents.

Eventually, Yun -- who earlier served as the head of North Korea's United Nations delegation in Vienna, the home of the U.N. nuclear watchdog agency -- struck a deal with a Bavarian company to obtain 22 tons of British-made tubes. They were placed on an Asia-bound ship in April 2003 and made it as far as the Suez Canal before German authorities ordered the cargo seized.

A subsequent investigation by nuclear weapons experts, including several at the International Atomic Energy Agency, concluded that the tubes were not suited for aircraft. The Chinese company named by NCG as the intended user denied ordering such tubes, U.S. and European investigators said.

In court documents and interviews, German officials alleged that NCG had operated as a front company for years and had sought to buy a wide range of sensitive equipment from European firms, including oscilloscopes and other electronic gear used in making and testing nuclear detonators.

Neither Yun nor NCG was charged with wrongdoing in Germany, but the owner of the company that sold the tubes was sentenced to four years in prison for his role in the sale.

The discovery of a series of attempted purchases prompted the CIA to predict that North Korea could have an operational uranium enrichment facility by 2005. But no such facility has ever been identified, and North Korea insists the tubes were meant for other programs, including missile production. North Korea has allowed U.S. officials to take smelted aluminum it purchased from other countries back to the United States for analysis.

U.N. Resolution 1718 stipulates that all member states must "prevent the direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer" to North Korea "through their territories or by their nationals, or using their flag vessels or aircraft, and whether or not originating in their territories" any material or technology that would contribute to a nuclear weapons program. White House and State Department officials have declined to comment on whether the Bush administration is trying to get China to act against NCG.

"We have nothing to add beyond what has already been said about North Korean nuclear cooperation with Syria," said State Department press officer Gonzalo Gallegos. "As the White House said last week, the United States is . . . committed to ensuring that North Korea does not further engage in proliferation activities."

Staff writer Glenn Kessler contributed to this report.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/10/AR2008051002810.html>

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Washington Post

May 12, 2008

Pg. 1

Spread Of Nuclear Capability Is Feared

Global Interest in Energy May Presage A New Arms Race

By Joby Warrick, Washington Post Staff Writer

VIENNA -- At least 40 developing countries from the Persian Gulf region to Latin America have recently approached U.N. officials here to signal interest in starting nuclear power programs, a trend that concerned proliferation experts say could provide the building blocks of nuclear arsenals in some of those nations.

At least half a dozen countries have also said in the past four years that they are specifically planning to conduct enrichment or reprocessing of nuclear fuel, a prospect that could dramatically expand the global supply of plutonium and enriched uranium, according to U.S. and international nuclear officials and arms-control experts.

Much of the new interest is driven by economic considerations, particularly the soaring cost of fossil fuels. But for some Middle Eastern states with ready access to huge stocks of oil or natural gas, such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the investment in nuclear power appears to be linked partly to concerns about a future regional arms race stoked in part by Iran's alleged interest in such an arsenal, the officials said.

"We are concerned that some countries are moving down the nuclear [weapons] path in reaction to the Iranians," a senior U.S. government official who tracks the spread of nuclear technology said in an interview. He declined to speak on the record because of diplomatic sensitivities. "The big question is: At what point do you reach the nuclear tipping point, when enough countries go nuclear that others decide they must do so, too?"

Although the United Arab Emirates has a proven oil reserve of 100 billion barrels, the world's sixth-largest, in January it signed a deal with a French company to build two nuclear reactors. Wealthy neighbors Kuwait and

Bahrain are also planning nuclear plants, as are Libya, Algeria and Morocco in North Africa and the kingdom of Jordan.

Even Yemen, one of the poorest countries in the Arab world, last year announced plans to purchase a nuclear reactor, which it says is needed to produce electricity; it is one of 11 Middle Eastern states now engaged in starting or expanding nuclear power programs.

Meanwhile, two of Iran's biggest rivals in the region, Turkey and Egypt, are moving forward with ambitious nuclear projects. Both countries abandoned any pursuit of nuclear power decades ago but are now on course to develop seven nuclear power plants -- four in Egypt and three in Turkey -- over the next decade.

Egypt's ambassador to the United States, Nabil Fahmy, told a recent gathering of Middle Eastern and nonproliferation experts that his country's decision was unrelated to Iran's nuclear activities. But he acknowledged that commercial nuclear power "does give you technology and knowledge," and he warned that a nuclear arms race may be inevitable unless the region's leaders agree to ban such weapons.

"We continue to take the high road, but there isn't much oxygen there, and it is very lonely," Fahmy told the gathering in Washington at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He added a prediction: "Without a comprehensive nuclear accord, you will have a proliferation problem in the Middle East, and it will be even worse in 10 years than it is today."

Many countries involved in nuclear expansion have stressed their peaceful intentions. Some, such as the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, publicly vowed never to pursue uranium enrichment or fuel reprocessing -- technologies that can be used to create fissile materials for nuclear weapons. But some arms-control experts say the sudden interest cannot be fully explained by rising oil prices.

"This is not primarily about nuclear energy. It's a hedge against Iran," said Ploughshares Fund president Joseph Cirincione, an expert on nuclear policy and author of "Bomb Scare: The History and Future of Nuclear Weapons." "They're starting their engines. It takes decades to build a nuclear infrastructure, and they're beginning to do it now. They're saying, 'If there's going to be an arms race, we're going to be in it.'"

'90 Percent' Is Deterrence

Although U.S. intelligence agencies have concluded that Iran halted its research into making nuclear weapons five years ago, the Islamic republic still seeks to make enriched uranium with centrifuges at its vast underground facility at Natanz. It is now operating about 3,000 centrifuges and plans to increase the number to 50,000.

While Iran insists that the uranium will be used only to make electricity, the United States and its European allies have sought to dissuade Tehran from pursuing the technology by pushing ever-tougher sanctions through the U.N. Security Council. Iran's neighbors, convinced that a nuclear-armed Tehran is now likely, are keeping their own options open, nuclear experts say.

Mohammed ElBaradei, the director general of the U.N.'s International Atomic Energy Agency and a winner with the IAEA of the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize for his work preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, has likened the pursuit of "latent" nuclear capability to buying an insurance policy.

"You don't really even need to have a nuclear weapon," ElBaradei said at a recent international conference of security officials in Munich. "It's enough to buy yourself an insurance policy by developing the capability, and then sit on it. Let's not kid ourselves: Ninety percent of it is insurance, a deterrence."

The Middle East's renewed interest in nuclear power is part of a global trend that began around 2004, as prices for fossil fuels began to rise. Before that, commercial nuclear development had remained relatively flat since 1986, when a massive fire at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in Ukraine widely spread radioactive contamination in history's worst commercial nuclear power accident.

But now, with oil supplies tightening and prices soaring, nuclear power is being viewed in a different light, said Alan McDonald, an IAEA official who coordinates the agency's programs on nuclear energy. McDonald said he thinks there is a logical economic argument for developing a domestic nuclear industry, even if a nation's oil reserves are measured by the tanker-load.

"Why would these Gulf states want to go nuclear? Because they know their oil will only become more valuable as global demand increases," McDonald said. "It may be more cost-effective to sell oil to Americans driving SUVs than to burn it domestically."

The IAEA officially encourages commercial nuclear development under policies backed by successive U.S. administrations since the 1950s. It also provides technical and legal assistance to any country that wants a nuclear power plant.

But IAEA officials say they have never previously seen such widespread interest in starting a domestic nuclear power industry. While officials declined to detail their correspondence with specific countries, the list of the newly interested includes several African countries, such as Nigeria and Namibia, and at least half a dozen former Soviet republics that are embracing new Western designs to replace less-reliable Soviet nuclear plants.

Programs Can Be Hidden

Nuclear weapons experts say commercial nuclear power plants, by themselves, pose relatively little proliferation risk, although they are frequently mentioned as possible targets for terrorist attacks. But nuclear power can give a country the technological expertise and infrastructure that could become the foundation for a clandestine weapons program.

Such covert programs can be successfully hidden for years, as was demonstrated in recent months by U.S. and Israeli allegations that Syria was building a secret plutonium production reactor near the desert town of Al Kibar. Plutonium is an efficient fuel for nuclear explosions, as well as for power generation.

Both India and Pakistan built nuclear devices using an industrial infrastructure built ostensibly for nuclear power. Taiwan and South Korea conducted weapons research under cover of civil power programs but halted the work after being confronted by the United States.

A particular concern is rising interest in nuclear enrichment and reprocessing, the commercial enterprise that creates nuclear fuel and then, after its use, separates plutonium from the spent fuel. The business has long been dominated by the United States, Russia and a consortium of European nations.

But since 2004, uranium-producing countries such as Namibia, South Africa, Argentina and Brazil, as well as close U.S. allies such as Canada and Australia, have sought to develop their own enrichment and reprocessing capabilities. All of these nations are seeking to cash in on the future growth in nuclear power generation.

Canada's push for expanded enrichment capacity has already prompted private but intense clashes with the Bush administration, officials said.

"They're all rethinking enrichment, even countries that did it in the past and gave it up," said a senior IAEA official who monitors fuel-cycle development, who agreed to be interviewed on the condition that he not be identified by name. "They already mine uranium and sell it, and now they realize they could make a lot more money if they enrich it."

While no one forecasts a nuclear-armed Canada or Australia, the change could lead to more nuclear materials being transported around the world, among countries in nearly every region with heightened nuclear expertise.

"People stand up and pay attention when you talk about enrichment and the fuel cycle," said the senior U.S. government official who tracks nuclear proliferation. "That's the long pole in the tent" in the acquisition of a nuclear arsenal. He added that, while the extensive system of IAEA inspections and monitoring for such programs is meant to prevent misuse, "that only holds up to the point where the country decides to kick the IAEA out."

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/11/AR2008051102212.html>

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Washington Post

May 12, 2008

Pg. 16

Experience With Syria Exemplifies Challenge That Detection Presents

By Joby Warrick, Washington Post Staff Writer

Syria went to extraordinary lengths to conceal its undeclared construction of a plutonium-producing nuclear reactor from spies in the sky and on the ground in recent years, according to a draft report by independent nuclear experts briefed by Bush administration officials.

The effectiveness of the camouflage effort raises new doubts about the prospects for certain detection of future clandestine nuclear weapons-related activities, the Institute for Science and International Security concluded in its report on the Syrian facility. "This case serves as a sobering reminder of the difficulty of identifying secret nuclear activities," the report said.

U.S. intelligence officials last month released images of the Syrian facility before it was bombed by Israel last September and bulldozed by the Syrian government once the raid became public. U.S. and Israeli officials have said the facility was a nearly completed nuclear reactor built with North Korean help and fitted with a false roof and walls that altered its shape when viewed from above.

According to the ISIS report to be released this week, the fake roof was just the start. Syrian engineers went to "astonishing lengths" to hide cooling and ventilation systems, power lines and other features that normally are telltale signs of a nuclear reactor, authors David Albright and Paul Brannan wrote.

For example, the main building appears small and shallow from the air, but it was evidently built over large underground chambers -- tens of meters in depth -- that were large enough to house the nuclear reactor, as well as a reserve water-storage tank and pools for spent fuel rods, the report said.

An extensive network of electrical lines appears to have been buried in trenches. Traditional water-cooling towers were replaced with an elaborate underground system that discharged into the Euphrates River. And, instead of using smokestack-like ventilation towers prominent at many reactor sites, the ventilation system appears to have been built along the walls of the building, with louver openings not visible from the air, the authors contended.

The ISIS report noted that early skepticism that Syria was building a reactor there was based partly on the observable absence of revealing features. "The current domestic and international capabilities to detect nuclear facilities and activities are not adequate to prevent more surprises in the future," the report warned.

Albright, a former U.N. weapons inspector, said his conclusions were based not only on photographs of the Syrian site but also on interviews with government officials who closely monitored the facility while it was under construction.

Syria has repeatedly denied that the Al Kibar facility was a reactor. Its ambassador, Imad Moustapha, at a April 25 news conference in Washington described the allegations as "absurd, preposterous stories." "This administration has a proven record of falsifying and fabricating stories about weapons of mass destruction," he said.

On Wednesday, International Atomic Energy Agency director general Mohammed Elbaradei said his organization should be able to report in coming weeks whether the facility was an undeclared nuclear reactor.

Staff writer Robin Wright contributed to this report.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/11/AR2008051102029.html>

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Washington Post

May 13, 2008

Pg. B2

Army To Fund Student Work At Biodefense Lab

The Army and Johns Hopkins University announced a deal yesterday enabling biotechnology graduate students to work with scientists at the military's premier biological weapons defense laboratory, at Fort Detrick in Frederick, at the Army's expense.

The students will be employed under the Army's Student Career Experience Program and will be eligible for Army reimbursement of their tuition at Johns Hopkins, school officials said.

The reimbursement agreement is a first for the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, which has had graduate students, including some from Hopkins, working in its labs for years, institute spokeswoman Caree Vander Linden said.

At least two fellowships will be offered yearly, starting in the fall, to students with a biodefense concentration within the biotechnology master's degree program. Scientists at the institute study some of the world's most dangerous pathogens, including anthrax, the Ebola virus and botulinum neurotoxin.

-- Associated Press

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/12/AR2008051202569_2.html

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Financial Times

May 13, 2008

U.S. To Send Food To N. Korea Under New Deal

By Demetri Sevastopulo, Washington

The US has agreed to give North Korea 500,000 tonnes of food aid under a new deal that would allow monitors unprecedented access to oversee distribution in the Stalinist state.

Washington will supply 400,000 tonnes via the World Food Programme while US non-governmental organisations will distribute another 100,000 tonnes. President George W. Bush is expected to approve the deal "within days," according to one official.

US officials said North Korea had agreed to provide unprecedented access to monitors to ensure the food reached the population and not just elites. Pyongyang will allow random inspections and more monitors into the country than under previous aid programmes.

The mechanism would also allow "port to mouth" inspections to protect against the siphoning off of food. The first shipment of 50,000 tonnes is expected to arrive in North Korea by early June, according to officials.

Jennifer Parmelee, a WFP spokeswoman, said the UN agency would “welcome” the resumption of US humanitarian assistance, but added “we have no word that any plans have been finalised”. The US will soon convene an experts meeting with the WFP, NGOs, and North Korean officials to determine what kind of food will be shipped.

The move comes as relief organisations warn that North Korea faces a looming humanitarian crisis because of rising prices sparked by substantial food shortfalls. The decision by North Korea to allow inspections across most of the country also stands in stark contrast to Burma, where the ruling military junta refuses to allow most relief workers into the cyclone-struck country.

The food aid deal comes as the US holds separate negotiations with Pyongyang towards completing the second phase of the six-party talks aimed at denuclearising the Korean peninsula. Officials rejected suggestions that there was any link between the issues.

The US official said North Korea had agreed to the more intrusive inspection regime because there was a higher level of trust between the governments because of the six-party talks. He added that North Korea was also feeling pressure because of the global food crisis, and the fact that South Korea and China had curtailed aid. A second official said the food deal had been closely co-ordinated with the South Korean government.

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c4424240-2077-11dd-80b4-000077b07658.html>

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Washington Post

May 13, 2008

Pg. 15

The Right Path With N. Korea

By Siegfried S. Hecker and William J. Perry

The Bush administration's North Korea strategy is being criticized from the right and the left for letting Pyongyang off the hook. Some advocate scuttling the six-party talks. Others suggest slowing our own compliance with the agreement to get North Korea to make a full declaration of its nuclear program first. We disagree with both positions. Our mantra should be: It's the plutonium, stupid.

North Korea does have the bomb -- but a limited nuclear arsenal and supply of plutonium to fuel its weapons. The Yongbyon plutonium production facilities are closed and partially disabled.

In separate visits to North Korea in February, we concluded that the disablement was extensive and thorough. We also learned that Pyongyang is prepared to move to the next crucial step of dismantling Yongbyon, eliminating plutonium production. This would mean no more bombs, no better bombs and less likelihood of export. After this success, we can concentrate on getting full declarations and on rolling back Pyongyang's supply of weapons and plutonium.

We must not miss this opportunity, because we have the chance to contain the risk posed by North Korea's arsenal while we work to eliminate it. As dismantlement proceeds, negotiations should focus concurrently on the plutonium declaration, the extent of the uranium enrichment effort and Pyongyang's nuclear exports.

Pyongyang's declaration of 30 kilograms of plutonium (sufficient for roughly four to five bombs) falls short of the estimate of 40 to 50 kilograms, based on our past visits. We believe that North Korea is prepared to produce operating records and permit access to facilities, equipment and waste sites for verification. Obtaining and verifying its declaration of plutonium production and inventories is imperative. Let's proceed.

Pyongyang continues to claim that it has made no efforts to enrich uranium, despite strong evidence to the contrary. Although it appears unlikely that these efforts reached a scale that constitutes a weapons threat, a complete accounting is required. Dismantlement of the Yongbyon facilities should not, however, be postponed to resolve this issue. In October 2002, the Bush administration accused North Korea of covert uranium enrichment, only to have Pyongyang withdraw from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and produce plutonium to fuel the arsenal that we are now attempting to eliminate.

Nuclear exports are of greater concern. As recently revealed evidence demonstrates, North Korea sold nuclear technology to Syria, much as it sold missile technology. North Korea must cooperate if we are to get to the bottom of the Syrian incident and ensure that it is not repeated elsewhere. Israel eliminated the Syrian threat, for now, by bombing the reactor at Al Kibar. But it is imperative that Pyongyang reveal the nature and extent of its export operations and, most important, whether it has similar deals underway with Iran.

We do not advocate letting Pyongyang off the hook, but a "confession" regarding Syria is not the critical issue. We have good knowledge of what the North Koreans supplied to Syria. What we really need is information from North Korea that will help us deal with potential threats. For example, was North Korea acting alone, or was it part of a more sophisticated proliferation ring involving Pyongyang's trading partners and suppliers? North Korea's leadership must resolve all three declaration issues fully, and these will take time to verify.

To ultimately succeed in the peaceful elimination of nuclear weapons, we must understand why North Korea devoted its limited resources to going nuclear. The September 2005 six-party joint statement addresses many of these concerns, promising mutual respect for national sovereignty, peaceful coexistence, and a commitment to stability and lasting peace in Northeast Asia, as well as normalization of relations. Given the acrimonious history of our relations, such steps require a transformation in the relationship between North Korea and the United States, a change that will first require building trust -- step by step.

The six-party negotiations have put us on that path, and there is much evidence of winds of change blowing in North Korea that will make navigating that path easier (the recent New York Philharmonic concert in Pyongyang is one such symbol of change; the joint industrial facility at Kaesong is another). But North Korea's reluctance to provide full declarations and the Syria revelations have moved us in the wrong direction.

Nevertheless, walking away from the talks or slowing them at this point would be counterproductive. Instead, in its remaining months, the Bush administration should focus on limiting North Korea's nuclear capabilities by concluding the elimination of plutonium production. If it can also get answers on the Syrian operation and resolve the question of uranium enrichment, it will put the next administration in a stronger position to finally end the nuclear threat from North Korea.

Siegfried S. Hecker and William J. Perry are with the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University. Hecker was director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory from 1986 through 1997. Perry was secretary of defense from 1994 through 1997.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/12/AR2008051202330.html>

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Air Force Times

Men who refused vaccine may get clear records

By William H. McMichael - Staff writer

Posted : Sunday May 11, 2008 16:19:49 EDT

A federal judge's decision could lead to clearing the records of military personnel who refused to take mandatory anthrax shots between 1999 and 2004.

Judge James Robertson of the district court for the District of Columbia admonished the Air Force Board for the Correction of Military Records, which had rejected a petition by two former Connecticut Air National Guard officers for compensatory relief for back pay and lost promotions after they claim they were forced to resign for refusing the vaccine.

The plaintiffs, Thomas Rempfer and the estate of the late Russell Dingle, based their appeal on a separate anthrax vaccine lawsuit.

Robertson said the Air Force records board mistakenly characterized that lawsuit as a victory for the government, when it was not, and cited that conclusion in rejecting the petition.

The board is a civilian entity empowered to review Air Force records "when necessary to correct an error or remove an injustice."

In early 1998, Rempfer and Dingle were appointed to look into concerns they and other unit members had about the vaccine's efficacy against airborne anthrax, which the Pentagon considered the likeliest threat against troops. After their review, they felt the concerns were justified, refused an order to be vaccinated and were disciplined, as were what is believed to be hundreds of other service members.

Rempfer and Dingle's estate want their personnel records corrected to reflect their work with that task force, to document that their discharge was an "illegal constructive termination" and to get back pay and allowances, plus rank and points lost as a result of that termination.

In his March 14 decision, Robertson wrote that the Air Force board must reconsider the cases "and explain its conclusions about the merits of plaintiffs' constructive discharge claims and their accompanying demands for compensatory relief."

In other words, said John J. "Lou" Michels, a pro bono attorney for the plaintiffs, the court told the board: "You're wrong, and you're going to have to reassess your opinion. And when you reconsider this matter, we're going to look very closely at your basis. You're disagreeing with a federal court ... it's not your job to do that. It's the federal court's expertise. You'd better have a pretty good justification."

Along with forcing review of the plaintiff's claims, the decision could open the door for other service members who may have similar complaints, Michels said.

But some claims could be blunted by a six-year statute of limitations on civil cases. In fact, Robertson ruled that time had run out on two of the three claims made by Rempfer and Dingle.

“For a lot of these folks, time has run out, which is why I think we need some legal redress on this, or an executive decision,” Michels said in an April 24 interview.

“What this should do is send a very clear message to Congress that this whole program was wrong from the very beginning,” Michels said.

The Pentagon “illegally injected people with an uncertified vaccine,” he said. “It seems to me a legislative fix is in order so that these kids don’t have to go out and hire lawyers to get their records fixed.”

Michels said Congress also should order the Veterans Affairs Department “to do a much better job of going out and finding people who took the vaccine, were sickened, and get them care for their injuries — very similar to what they did for Agent Orange folks.”

The vaccine has long been approved for use against anthrax contracted through the skin. In a 2003 decision, U.S. District Court Judge Emmet Sullivan sided with six anonymous military litigants to rule that the Food and Drug Administration had never approved the anthrax vaccine for protection against inhaled spores and that it was being used for an “unapproved purpose.”

It was this ruling that the Air Force board misinterpreted, Robinson found.

Sullivan’s decision, Robertson wrote, meant that up to that time, forcing service members to take anthrax shots violated federal law.

The Pentagon had to suspend its involuntary program for most of the time between December 2003 and February 2007, until after the FDA ruled that the vaccine was safe and efficient for all forms of anthrax and the Pentagon could obtain new supplies.

Inoculations are required for service members and emergency-essential and equivalent Defense Department civilians assigned for 15 or more consecutive days to the U.S. Central Command or U.S. Forces Korea areas.

http://www.airforcetimes.com/news/2008/05/airforce_anthrax_051008w/

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Washington Post

May 14, 2008

Pg. 13

U.S. Increases Estimate Of N. Korean Plutonium

By Glenn Kessler, Washington Post Staff Writer

U.S. intelligence analysts have prepared a fresh estimate of the size of North Korea's stockpile of plutonium -- larger than previous assessments -- that will be compared with the information contained in 18,822 pages of reactor production records turned over by North Korea last week, according to U.S. officials.

North Korean officials have said about 30 kilograms of plutonium was produced at their five-megawatt reactor at Yongbyon, at the low end of most private and government estimates. The new U.S. estimate is expected to be from 35 to 40 or 50 to 60 kilograms, though sources would not detail how much it had increased from the last government estimate.

"It will be a little more than past estimates," said a senior U.S. official with access to the intelligence. "It solidifies it and presents a more solid assessment."

The official, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he was discussing intelligence matters, said analysts had tried to rescrub previous assumptions about the North Korean program in order to reach the new figure.

A kilogram is 2.2 pounds, and about four to six kilograms are needed for a nuclear weapon. That means the gap between U.S. and North Korean tallies could reflect enough for one or more weapons.

The higher estimate could complicate the State Department's desire to verify North Korea's claims, a key test before President Bush lifts two key sanctions against Pyongyang. North Korea, as part of its nuclear declaration, is supposed to disclose its stockpile of plutonium, and also acknowledge U.S. concerns and evidence on nuclear dealings with Syria and a suspected uranium enrichment program.

Sung Kim, the State Department's director for Korean affairs, told reporters yesterday that reactor documents "are an important first step in terms of verifying North Korea's declaration," which will ultimately include "access to their facilities, sampling, interviews with personnel involved in their programs."

In coming weeks, more than a dozen government experts will pore through the documents, which must be translated from Korean.

The U.S. government has never made public an official estimate of North Korea's plutonium stockpile. In 2006, the Institute for Science and International Security, a Washington-based research organization, estimated that the North Korean facility had discharged 43 to 61 kilograms, but it recovered only 20 to 53 kilograms because of waste and inefficiency.

A key factor in the estimates is whether North Korea had separated as much as 10 kilograms of plutonium before 1992, an issue that has divided the intelligence community. The institute reached the lower end of its estimate by assuming North Korea did not recover the plutonium in that period.

North Korea's reactor had been frozen under a 1994 agreement with the United States, but that deal collapsed in 2002 after the Bush administration charged that Pyongyang had a clandestine project to enrich uranium -- a different route to a nuclear weapon. North Korea has denied it had such a program.

Few details have been revealed about the evidence behind that assertion, but yesterday a high-ranking former intelligence official who reviewed it said it was not convincing.

"I was extremely concerned that people were giving a lot more credence to the evidence" than warranted, Carl W. Ford Jr., former head of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, told a gathering at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "Before we make judgments, we ought to have some evidence."

Last year, North Korea provided Kim with samples from aluminum tubes that U.S. analysts said were used in the enrichment program but which Pyongyang said was intended for a missile factory. U.S. experts concluded that those samples contained traces of enriched uranium, suggesting they were intermingled with nuclear-related equipment. But U.S. analysts are still scrutinizing whether the source was indigenous -- suggesting that the enrichment program operated -- or whether the contamination occurred in Pakistan, which supplied some equipment to North Korea evidently tainted by uranium particles, according to a U.S. official privy to intelligence on the matter.

Staff writer Joby Warrick contributed to this report.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/13/AR2008051303205.html>

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New York Times

May 14, 2008

North Korea Documents Make Debut, At A Distance

By Helene Cooper

WASHINGTON — The State Department, seeking to ward off criticism, kicked off a public-relations offensive on Tuesday by offering reporters a view — from a distance — of nuclear documents that senior officials said appeared to represent a complete accounting of North Korea's plutonium production.

Officials brought documents received last week into a briefing room and put them on a table where they could be photographed, but not touched, which might have been tantalizing were it not for the fact that the reports had not been translated.

The 18,000 pages, turned over by North Korea last week, were hailed as a vital step toward the completion of a denuclearization agreement. The administration wants to complete the pact, which could be viewed as a rare foreign policy victory, before President Bush leaves office.

Conservatives have complained that the United States is not getting enough out of North Korea as the two sides try to complete the agreement.

Sung Kim, the director of the State Department's Korea office, said North Korea may have slowed down the pace of its compliance with one part of the deal, which requires the dismantlement of a nuclear reactor at Yongbyon.

"We'd like to see it sped up," Mr. Kim said. North Korean officials have indicated that they want to make sure that the United States delivers the fuel oil it has promised to the North before the dismantlement is completed.

Mr. Kim, who was in North Korea last week, said his North Korean counterparts had also reiterated their desire to be removed from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, a step the Bush administration has promised if the nuclear deal is completed.

But the documents provided by North Korea do not include any information about two other topics on which it promised to be forthcoming: a uranium program that some officials in the Bush administration regard as another track toward weapons development and North Korea's involvement in the proliferation of nuclear material.

The nuclear pact requires North Korea to disclose all of its nuclear activities, but it remains unclear whether the administration will get much explicit disclosure on uranium and proliferation.

The House on Tuesday debated a bill that is intended to force the administration to hold North Korea to a more stringent standard, requiring it to show that it has stopped providing nuclear assistance to other countries before it is removed from the list.

The White House opposes the bill and administration officials have indicated that the United States might try to finesse the issues, by getting North Korea to acknowledge American concerns without admitting anything. The United States would then try to verify that North Korea had stopped its weapons program by sending inspectors to all of North Korea's nuclear facilities, administration officials said.

Mr. Kim said it would take weeks to go through the seven boxes of documents, which relate to North Korea's plutonium program and go back to 1987. They contain information about North Korea's three major campaigns to reprocess plutonium for nuclear weapons, administration officials say.

Also on Tuesday, the White House spokeswoman, Dana Perino, said the United States was looking for ways to get 500,000 tons of food aid to North Korea, perhaps through nongovernmental organizations or the United Nations. Ms. Perino said that such a step would not be linked to the nuclear pact.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/14/washington/14diplo.html?ref=world>

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Time

Monday, May. 12, 2008

Security Flaws Exposed at Nuke Lab

By Adam Zagorin/Washington

If you were a terrorist looking for weapons-grade nuclear material in America, the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory might be a good place to start. At the core of the nuclear-weapons research facility about an hour's drive from San Francisco stands the "Superblock," a collection of buildings surrounded by multi-story steel-mesh fencing, a no-man's-land, electronic security gear, armed guards and cables to prevent a helicopter landing on the roof. These defenses are in place largely to protect Building 332, a repository for roughly 2,000 pounds of deadly plutonium and volatile, weapons-grade uranium — enough fissile material to build at least 300 nuclear weapons. But a recent simulated terror attack tested those defenses, and sources tell TIME that the results were not reassuring.

One night several weeks ago, according to TIME's sources, a commando team posing as terrorists attacked and penetrated the lab, quickly overpowering its defenses to reach its "objective" — a mock payload of fissile material. The exercise highlighted a number of serious security shortcomings at Livermore, sources say, including the failure of a hydraulic system essential to operating an extremely lethal Gatling gun that protects the facility. Experts contacted by TIME — including congressional staff from both parties informed of the episode, and experts personally familiar with safeguards at Livermore — all said that the test amounts to an embarrassment to those responsible for securing the nation's nuclear facilities, and that it required immediate steps to correct what some called the most dangerous security weaknesses ever found at the lab.

Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman was quickly informed of the episode, along with other senior officials in the U.S. nuclear and national security apparatus. "People who know about this are very concerned; they are not happy," said one senior congressional aide.

"It is essential to prevent terrorists from accessing nuclear materials at Livermore," said Danielle Brian, the executive director of the Project on Government Oversight, an independent nonprofit that recently issued a [study](#) of the lab's security. "Suicidal terrorists would not need to steal the fissile material, they could simply detonate it as part of an improvised nuclear device right on the spot." Some 7 million people live within a 50-mile radius of the laboratory — a fact that has prompted at least one panel of experts to recommend moving its nuclear-weapons material elsewhere.

According to a former senior officer familiar with the details of security at Livermore, simulated attacks are staged approximately every 12 months. The attack team's objective is usually to penetrate the "Superblock," after which the attackers are timed to determine whether they can hold their ground long enough to construct a crude "dirty bomb" that could, in theory, be detonated immediately, or can buy themselves enough time to fabricate a rudimentary nuclear device, approximating the destructive power of the low-yield weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. A third option in the simulation is for the attackers to abscond with the nuclear material into the heavily populated San Francisco Bay area.

The security flaws exposed in the recent test could exacerbate public opposition to nuclear weapons material being stored at Livermore, which is located near a major highway interchange, atop a vital agricultural irrigation canal and within a mile of two elementary schools, a preschool, a middle school and a senior center. In 2005 the Energy Department approved the doubling of the amount of plutonium stored at Livermore, less than five months after a scientific panel recommended, for security reasons, that nearly all of it be moved to a safer, more remote site.

"The fissile material simply cannot be made safe and secure," says Marylia Kelley, executive director of Tri-Valley CARES, a Livermore nuclear weapons watchdog group. "We in the community, which has 81,000 people, want to get rid of the plutonium and highly enriched uranium as soon as possible."

The alleged failure of Livermore's truck-mounted Gatling guns could also draw heavy criticism. Those weapons have long been controversial because they can fire 4000 rounds a minute and kill a person more than a mile away, raising fears among local residents about what might happen if the guns were ever discharged. The weapons are also supposed to be tested on a regular basis, and the reason for their reported failure remains unclear.

Many critics have also argued that the entire process of conducting "force-on-force" simulations at Livermore is flawed because the exercise does not adequately approximate conditions that would pertain during a real attack. The defenders are always given advance notice of the simulations, which usually occur at night or on weekends, when few of the facility's thousands of staff are present. As a result, there is no simulation of the hostage-taking that might occur if the lab were attacked during business hours. The absence of most regular employees also means that defenders do not have to worry about directing their fire to avoid innocent victims, many of whom might be present during an actual attack.

Finally, nothing in the "force-on-force" exercises simulates the danger posed by Livermore being situated beneath the flight path to several nearby airports. "If a plane ever tried to fly into the lab," says Tri-Valley CARE'S Kelley, "no one has ever explained how it would be stopped."

As for the Department of Energy, in a press release issued last Friday referring to the recent force-on-force exercise at Livermore, it claimed that an inspection team sent to the site after the simulation had noted both "several very positive areas" and "other areas requiring corrective action."

"We do not believe the [nuclear] materials at Livermore are at risk, and we do believe that security is strong," a DOE spokesperson told TIME. "But we're also interested in examining any deficiencies, which is the purpose of these routine exercises."

<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1739535,00.html>

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