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The Cutting Edge of Future U.S. Nuclear Weapons?

The national nonprofit organization Physicians for Social Responsibility has made available a Department of Defense (DoD) and DOE Report to Congress on the Defeat of Hard and Deeply Buried Targets (HDBT s). HDBT s are underground command and control bunkers, leadership quarters, garrisons, etc., built out of reinforced concrete or tunneled into mountains. Due largely to the Gulf War and the present war in Afghanistan U.S. military planners are particularly keen to find ways to destroy HDBT s. This recent report estimates that there are potentially some 10,000 HDBT s worldwide (report page 8), not all of which can be destroyed by conventional weapons. In response, DoD and DOE have completed initial studies on how existing nuclear weapons can be modified to defeat those HDBT s that cannot be held at risk with conventional high-explosives or current nuclear concepts. Any development and procurement of advanced nuclear capabilities would be considered in the broad context of nuclear stockpile policy, plans, and priorities (p. 4.) On the latter point, DoD will soon be releasing a new Nuclear Posture Review which is likely to include this new focus on destroying hard-to-get HDBT s.

Although the report states that [t]here is no current program to design a new or modified HDBT Defeat nuclear weapon, nevertheless DoD and DOE have formed a joint Nuclear Planning Group to define the appropriate scope and option selection criteria for a possible feasibility and cost study. (p.18) Indeed, a classified study called Project SAND DUNE was conducted in 1997 that addressed nuclear solutions for holding the most challenging HDBT s at risk. (p. 11) Currently DoD and DOE are investigating potential options and costs. (p. 17) Moreover, [f]or destruction of more deeply buried facilities, DoD and DOE are studying the sensitivities and synergies of nuclear weapon yield, penetration, accuracy and tactics. (p. 21) This in large part refers to the further development of earth-penetrating nuclear weapons that can burrow underground, thereby multiplying exponentially their destructive force. This is also focussed on the development of new low yield nuclear weapons (or the modification of existing weapons to lower their yield). Low yield nuclear weapons would be inherently more dangerous because they would be more usable. One U.S. congressman has already called for the use of low yield nuclear weapons in Afghanistan.

The overarching significance of this report is that it is further evidence (if any more is needed) that the U.S. intends to never disarm its nuclear stockpile. As recently as the May 2000 review conference of the 1970 NonProliferation Treaty (NPT) the U.S. and the other nuclear powers restated their NPT obligation to disarm as an unequivocal commitment. Yet the strong signal is that the American nuclear weapons complex is beginning the process of designing and producing new advanced concepts to destroy HDBT s, contrary to the stated current U.S. policy that there will no production of new-designs. This raises a whole host of questions concerning the future of nuclear weapons, the continuing viability of the international nonproliferation regime and whether the U.S. will be conducting full-scale testing sometime in the future.

The DoD/DOE HDBT Defeat Report is downloadable from our web site at www.nukewatch.org.

551 West Cordova Road #808, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87505-4100 Ph: 505.989.7342 Fax: 505.989.7352
e-mail: nuclearwatch@earthlink.net website: www.nukewatch.org