

Five NATO to Partners Demand U.S. Nuclear Weapons be Withdrawn from Europe

By John LaForge

U.S. nuclear weapons still deployed in Europe are “militarily useless,” say five NATO member states who will soon urge the Obama administration to remove them all.

The French news service *AFP* reported that “as domestic pressure grows to rid its soil of outdated Cold War-era aerial bombs,” Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Norway will ask “in the coming weeks” that the more than 200 U.S. warheads “on European soil belonging to other NATO member states” be withdrawn, according to a spokesman for Belgian Prime Minister Yves Leterme.

Among the five, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands all host U.S. forces that store, maintain and train to use Cold War-era nuclear gravity bombs (10 to 20 in each country). Over the last 10 years all three have seen tens of thousands of protesters take to the streets — and hundreds go to jail — demanding withdrawal of the U.S.’s nuclear weapons.

Angie Zelter, of Trident Ploughshares UK, and author of *Trident on Trial: The Case for People’s Disarmament* told Nukewatch Feb. 24, that the announcement “is probably for the pragmatic reason of trying to stop the escalating civil resistance and also a late realization that ... it would cost huge amounts of money to upgrade the security systems needed to keep them [the warheads] safe in Europe. After all this was one of the reasons given for taking them out of the USAFB Lakenheath, in the UK — where protesters regularly got into the high security areas where the U.S.’s H-bombs were stored.”

Alexander Bell reports in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* that many of the U.S. nukes are deployed in Italy (~50) and in Turkey, which houses as many as 90 “B61” bombs at its Incirlik Air Base. The B61s are 300-500 kiloton “variable yield” devices — 24 to 40 times the destructive power of the U.S. bomb that killed 170,000 people at Hiroshima.

Manual Challenges Denial of DU Use in Afghanistan

A formerly secret German Army manual challenges repeated Pentagon and British assurances that depleted uranium munitions have not been used in Afghanistan.

The manual, leaked to German anti-DU activists, has reignited suspicions of the use of the toxic and radioactive shells and contradicts redundant denials given by the U.S. military, the UK Ministry of Defense and NATO that no DU was used in Afghanistan.

If the use of DU is confirmed, then official denials themselves become a point of interest, as they run counter to the military’s long-standing position of justifying the use of DU that its has declared to be safe.

German peace campaigners raised allegations of DU use even before the 2001 launch of the U.S. military assault on Afghan cities, pointing to documentation that the munitions were moved into Afghanistan via U.S. military bases in Germany.

The International Campaign to Ban Uranium Weapons (ICBUW) reports that use by the U.S. of its A10 Warthog or Thunderbolt aircraft — one of the main users of DU ammunition — remains widespread in Afghanistan.

The manual is a war-fighting guide for Germany’s “Bundeswehr” forces in Afghanistan, was published in 2005 and was marked “classified.” The section on DU begins:

During the operation “Enduring Freedom” in support of the Northern Alliance against the Taliban-Regime, US-aircraft used, amongst others, armor-piercing incendiary munitions with a DU-core. Because of its pyrophoric character, when this type of munition is used against hard targets (e.g. tanks, cars) the uranium burns. During the combustion, toxic dusts can be deposited, particularly at and around the targets, which can then be re-suspended easily.

The manual then warns troops to recognize contaminated targets and about the potential health threat from DU munitions, and suggests precautions. It recommends the use of full nuclear, chemical and biological (NBC) warfare suits:

DU munitions can therefore induce toxic and radiological damage to exposed personnel through heavy metal poisoning and very low-level radiation. When it is suspected that these weapons have been used (burnt out cars or tanks, burned out convoys, typical 30mm bullet holes), NBC ... protection suits and NBC masks have to be worn in the vicinity of the munitions’ impact, until NBC security troops can rule out any threat.

Among the precautions the manual recommends are:

- ☒ No unnecessary contact with munitions, munition parts, or any other potentially contaminated material
- ☒ Examination through NBC troop for possible radiation,
- ☒ Issuing of film dosimeters,
- ☒ Putting on NBC-masks,
- ☒ Sealing up of clothing or wearing personal NBC protection suit,
- ☒ Documenting any contact with DU-contaminated material (who, where, when, what, how long and dose),
- ☒ Immediate report with submission of the dosimeter,
- ☒ Calling in of the responsible troop doctor.

From Germany, disarmament activist Marion Kuepker of Nonviolent Action for Abolition of Nuclear Weapons, wrote to *the Quarterly*, “This is a small step but not the expected ‘turning point’ toward a nuclear-free world. For this we need NATO — the leading perpetrator in today’s nuclear arms race — to immediately stop the British, French and U.S. modernization of their nuclear weapons and launching systems (which flagrantly violates the NPT). And ultimately, all nuclear weapons powers must renounce the option of ‘first use’ of nuclear weapons.”

During the Cold War, NATO war planners claimed that the nuclear weapons were to be the first used in response to a Soviet invasion of Europe. In 1981, the late Al Haig, who was then the Secretary of State, caused an international outcry after saying, “There are contingency plans in the NATO doctrine to fire a nuclear weapon for demonstrative purposes, to demonstrate to the other side that they are exceeding the limits of toleration in the conventional area.”

As public awareness of the uncontrollable effects of nuclear war grew, massive protests turned public opinion against the weapons. “In the last few years grass roots opposition to these bases has become stronger and stronger and certainly gained public support,” said Rae Street in Manchester, Vice President of the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. “However, considering the size of the UK part of the U.S. Trident fleet and the French nuclear arsenal, there is a long way to go,” she said.

The NATO members’ announcement came a day after four senior Belgian politicians called on Brussels to urge NATO to abolish the U.S. arsenal. In a widely published opinion piece, ex-foreign minister Willy Claes, who served as NATO secretary-general in the 1990s, ex-premiers Jean-Luc Dehaene and Guy Verhofstadt, and former foreign minister Louis Michel said, “The U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe have lost all military importance.”

The manual raises serious questions of accountability and liability. If Germany’s troops were required to record DU strike sites, access to these records may be possible. German campaigners and the German Green Party have submitted a Freedom of Information request asking for any data that the military holds.

U.S. Set to End Use of Some DU

The United States is seeking alternatives to DU for the future production of medium caliber bullets, although U.S. government sources have declined to disclose the reasons behind the decision.

Dave Cullen, the chief researcher with the International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons (ICBUW) reported in January that the dramatic change in policy will affect the future production of 25 mm and 30 mm rounds, which are used in the Bradley Fighting Vehicle and the A-10 Thunderbolt Aircraft.

Use of the A10 Warthog/Thunderbolt caused the majority of DU contamination in Iraq, and almost all the contamination in the Balkans.

ICBUW confirmed with Maneuver Ammunition Systems (MAS) — the U.S. government body that manages ammunition procurement for the Pentagon — that a strategic decision has been made to move away from uranium in medium caliber rounds. MAS refused to single out a reason for the policy change, but indicated that environmental considerations were a factor.

Costa Rica Bans Production of DU Weapons in Zonas Francas

Costa Rica has passed legislation banning production of DU in its Zonas Francas or Free Ports, and campaigners called the move a sign of growing political opposition to the weapons.

Zonas Francas are common throughout Latin America and are seen as a means of boosting employment in impoverished areas by offering favorable operating conditions to foreign companies.

Diputada Edine von Herold Duarte of the country’s ruling National Liberation Party saw the opportunity to implement the DU ban when Costa Rica was forced by the World Trade Organization to update its Zonas Francas rules.

The idea of a manufacturing ban took time to be accepted by the government’s Economics Commission. After explaining how uranium weapons’ indiscriminate and inhumane nature contradict Costa Rican foreign and domestic policy, opposition softened. Eventually, the Zonas Francas reform text, including amendments covering uranium weapons, received the unanimous backing of the Parliament.

“The impact of this new bill is political as far as our foreign policy is concerned. We are strengthening our tradition of being a country that upholds its culture of peace,” said Duarte. “Our current work supporting the model Nuclear Weapons Convention [outlawing thermonuclear weapons] is yet another example for other countries to follow.”

In a related event, on November 24, a majority in the Second Chamber of the Dutch Parliament adopted a motion that seeks a temporary halt to the military use of weapons systems that contain depleted uranium and heavy metals.



From left, at the gates of Vermont Yankee, Frances Crowe, 88, Julia Bonafine, 39, Hattie Nestel, 68, Ellen Graves, 67, Marcia Gagliardi, 60 — part of what the *New York Times* calls the “particularly adamant cadre” that has demanded and recently won its 2012 shutdown.

State Pulls Plug on Vermont Yankee

MONTPELIER, Vermont — On Feb. 25, Vermont’s legislature became the first in the country to deny a license extension to a nuclear reactor, voting overwhelmingly to nix Vermont Yankee’s request for a 20-year renewal, ensuring that the faulty reactor’s final shutdown will take place in 2012.

The legislature’s action came amid public uproar and national headlines over the discovery of reactor-borne tritium and cobalt-60 contaminating surface and groundwater.

Entergy officials, who operate Vermont Yankee, knew for two years about the leaking tritium but did not report or do anything to stop the leaks. In the hottest spot, the cancer-causing isotope was found at 2.7 million picocuries-per-liter (pCi/l) and some is suspected of having reached the Connecticut River. The high levels of tritium far surpass the federal drinking water limit of 20,000 pCi/l.

The tritium hot spot and its plume is at least 35 feet deep, 200 feet wide and 400 feet long, according to Arnie Gundersen, a nuclear engineer and a member of the legislature’s Oversight Panel, who spoke Feb. 24 on Democracy Now!

Highly radioactive cobalt-60 has also been found at prohibited levels in surface water.

Last fall, news of cobalt-60 contamination raised a furor after Entergy admitted that the cobalt had reached the Connecticut River. According to Gundersen, the release of cobalt-60 raises ominous questions about radiation monitoring outside the reactor, and about a report by a state consultant that failed to mention cobalt-60 contamination.

“Cobalt-60 is a fission product that only comes from nuclear fission inside the fuel rod,” Gundersen wrote in an email to the *Rutland Herald* Sept. 17. “The fuel rod would have had to be cracked, allowing the cobalt-60 into the reactor coolant pipes. A steam or water line would have to be leaking to allow the cobalt-60 to escape the pipes. The ventilation filters are the last line of defense to pick up whatever leaks out,” Gundersen wrote.

The sources of the tritium leaks are thought to be any of 40 underground pipes that Vermont Yankee officials repeatedly claimed, even under oath, did not exist. The Oversight Panel says at least 12 Entergy officials provided it with erroneous information. Amidst demonstrations and civil resistance actions aimed at a permanent shutdown, Entergy spokesperson Rob Williams said that continuing to operate the reactor will help them find the leak. Entergy also says that the contamination has not shown up in off-site water wells so does not pose a problem.

Excavation in search of the tritium leaks’s source began in an area with the highest contamination rate. The work was halted Feb. 17 due to safety concerns for workers. An enclosure building is being constructed over the diggings “to contain the radiation.” William Irwin, the radiological health chief for Vermont’s Department of Health, said the high concentrations indicated the contamination was very close to a source, and something that had recently been in the reactor. “This is almost raw reactor tritium” he told the *Rutland Herald*.

20 Canadian Doctors Resign Over Uranium Mining Proposal

SEPT-ILES, Quebec — Led by a group of medical doctors, 1,000 residents of Sept-Iles gathered Dec. 13 to condemn plans for uranium mining on Quebec’s North Shore.

In an unprecedented public protest, 20 of the local hospital’s physicians — psychiatrists, family doctors, anesthetists, a lung specialist, surgeons, and gynecologists — resigned as a group. It’s the only hospital in the city, 550 miles northeast of Montreal. The mining critics point to its historical contamination of drinking water, environmental destruction and irreversible health hazards. In their letter to the federal minister of health, the physicians said, “We regret the effect that this mass exodus will have ... but we believe it to be contrary to our code of ethics to not warn the authorities.”

Canwest reported that the doctors “fear for their own families’ health as well as for the health of the population in the region.” As a result of the action, the government in Quebec has announced the creation of a special committee to study the potential risks of uranium exploration and mining on health and safety. British Columbia and Nova Scotia have banned uranium mining in their provinces, but Quebec has not. Canadian mines produce about 20 percent of the world’s uranium supply. — *The Canadian Press*, Dec. 4 & 14; *the Montreal Gazette*, Dec. 5 & 7; Québec solidaire news release, Dec. 7; & *Canwest News Service*, Dec. 5, 2009