

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#600 - Growing Threat Of Nuclear War

May 27, 1998

The cold war ended six years ago, and President Clinton has said, "In this new world, our children are growing up free from the shadows of the cold war and the threat of nuclear holocaust." [1] Unfortunately, the President is not telling the truth. The threat of nuclear war continues to worsen, according to recent reports in credible journals.

A special report published in the NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE April 30, 1998, assesses the danger of an accidental launch of nuclear weapons from Russia. [2] According to the report, an estimated 6.8 million Americans would be killed instantly in such an accident, with millions more exposed to lethal doses of radiation. And the likelihood of such an accident is increasing, not diminishing, as time passes, the report concludes.

Both Russia and the United States --though no longer enemies --have thousands of nuclear warheads ready to fire on a few minutes' notice. Specifically, the Russians have roughly 2500 nuclear warheads poised to launch at all times. The U.S. has an even larger number.

In 1994, Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin agreed to stop aiming strategic nuclear missiles at each others' countries --and this provides the basis for President Clinton's misleading assurances that our children are growing up free from the threat of nuclear holocaust. But the geographic coordinates of the original military targets --many of which are cities --remain in the memory banks of all these weapons, so the nuclear warheads can be re-targeted at U.S. and Russian cities within seconds.

Russia's ballistic missiles are reported to be more dangerous than ours. Russia has programmed its missiles so that, if they fire accidentally without a target programmed into memory, they will automatically aim themselves at their cold war military targets, which could be a missile silo in Montana, or the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. Unfortunately, neither U.S. nor Russian missiles can be commanded to self-destruct after they are launched. [3]

The old Soviet Union and the U.S. developed elaborate systems to keep nuclear weapons under centralized control. However, now the situation has changed significantly in Russia, and recent U.S. military policies are making things worse.

Both the U.S. and Russia employ a strategy called "launch on warning." This means that each country will launch a counter-attack as soon as it decides that an attack has been launched against it. The idea is to launch quickly so that the counter-attack missiles will be safely off the ground before the incoming missiles rain down. That way, the promise of a swift counter-attack can serve as a credible deterrent to a first strike. Launch on warning leaves precious little time for thoughtful deliberations. Each country has submarine-based nuclear missiles within 15 minutes' striking distance of the other. Thus the country perceiving an attack will have several minutes to verify that an attack is occurring, several minutes for top-level decision-making, and a couple of minutes to disseminate the authorization to launch a counterstrike. Then it's over.

Mistakes are inevitable. On January 25, 1995, Russian radar operators observed an ominous blip on their screens. [4] It was a rocket rising into the sky somewhere off the coast of Norway. Such a rocket could conceivably deliver 8 nuclear bombs to Moscow within 15 minutes, so word went out immediately throughout the Russian military command.

As the various stages of the rocket separated from each other, the radar blips made it seem as if an attack by several missiles might be under way. President Boris Yeltsin activated his "nuclear briefcase," the portable computer station which would allow him to launch a full counterstrike.

After 8 minutes --with less than 4 minutes remaining before a

counter attack would be launched under Russian launch-on-warning protocols -- top Russian officials concluded that the trajectory of the rocket was taking it out to sea, where it would pose no threat to Russia. The crisis passed.

The rocket turned out to be a U.S. scientific probe intended to explore the upper atmosphere, to improve human knowledge of the northern lights. The Norwegians had informed Russian authorities of the planned launch weeks before, but the message had not made its way through the Russian bureaucracy to those who needed to know.

The system worked that night in early 1995 and catastrophe was averted. However, several nuclear weapons specialists, writing in SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN, recently concluded that "the systems built to control Russian nuclear weapons are now crumbling." [3,pg.76] Here is some of the evidence they presented:

** In Russia, local electric companies have repeatedly shut off the power to various nuclear weapons installations after the military authorities failed to pay their electric bills.

** Equipment that controls nuclear weapons frequently malfunctions, and critical electronic devices and computers sometimes switch to combat mode for no apparent reason.

** On seven occasions during the fall of 1996 operations at several nuclear weapons centers were severely disrupted when thieves tried to steal critical communications cables to retrieve the valuable copper they contained.

An assessment of Russian nuclear controls, written by the U.S. CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and leaked to the WASHINGTON TIMES reached basically the same conclusion. [5] The CIA wrote, "The Russian nuclear command and control system is being subjected to stresses it was not designed to withstand as a result of wrenching social changes, economic hardship, and malaise within the armed forces."

That CIA report warned of "conspiracies within nuclear armed units" to commit nuclear blackmail. "This has become a concern as living conditions and morale have deteriorated in the military, even among elite nuclear submariners, nuclear warhead handlers, and SRF," the CIA wrote. SRF is the Strategic Rocket Force --the group that controls Russia's intercontinental ballistic missiles.

The CIA also warned that the normal chain of command has broken down in some parts of the Russian military. According to the CIA, some submarine crews may be able to launch the ballistic missiles under their control without having to obtain special codes from their superiors. [3,4]

In February, 1997, the military institute responsible for designing the complex control systems for Russia's Strategic Rocket Force staged a one-day strike to protest pay arrears and the lack of funds to upgrade their equipment. Three days later Russian defense minister Igor Rodionov said, "If the shortage of funds persists... Russia may soon approach a threshold beyond which its missiles and nuclear systems become uncontrollable." [3]

Two-thirds of Russia's early-warning radars no longer work, and two satellites (out of 9) are missing from their satellite surveillance system. [3,6]

Furthermore, about half of Russia's nuclear "early warning" radar network no longer resides on Russian soil. Some stations are in Latvia, others in the Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan. Disputes over funding and personnel have put the operational integrity of these systems in doubt.

These systems are the eyes and ears of Russian nuclear defense analysts, and, as a result, Russia is partially blind and deaf. [6] This

means Russia may have difficulty deciding the origin of a missile attack --is it a phantom radar blip, a scientific rocket gone astray, a military missile launched accidentally, or a serious attack?

The weakest link in the nuclear-weapons control system may be the humans involved. Here, we know more about the Americans than we do about the Russians. A 1987 report said that the U.S. had 112,000 people involved in handling U.S. nuclear weapons.[7] The military is deeply concerned about the psychological stability of these people, and has developed a Personnel Reliability Program to select them. However, a large number of people who have gone through the Personnel Reliability Program screening have later been "decertified", which means removed from their positions. Individuals are decertified if they are found guilty of negligence, serious civil infractions, repeated alcohol or drug abuse, or other aberrant behavior that might lead to unreliable performance. According to Department of Defense figures from 1975 to 1984 some 51,000 individuals were decertified, an average of more than 5000 each year. Among these, the majority were decertified for drug and alcohol abuse or for psychiatric problems. Therefore at any given time, thousands of potentially unstable individuals have day-to-day responsibility for handling nuclear weapons.

A 1981 survey of U.S. personnel at military installations in Italy and West Germany found that drugs were used ON DUTY by 43% of army personnel, 17% of air force personnel, 35% of marines, and 49% of navy personnel. Defense Department officials testified before Congress in 1982 that an estimated 28% of army personnel and 21% of navy personnel drank alcohol while on duty. The highest prevalence of drinking was reported among senior officers.[7]

Russia has similar problems, but worse. About 45,000 Soviets died from acute alcohol poisoning in 1976 --100 times the number who died of that cause in the U.S. that year. Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s per-capita alcohol consumption doubled in the Soviet Union. Alcohol abuse is reported to be more prevalent in the Russian military than among civilians. According to one estimate, 1/3 of Russian military personnel are alcohol-dependent, with heavy drinking especially prevalent among officers.[7]

The Russian army has fallen on hard times. It is a mere shadow of its former self. To try to maintain its status as a world power, Russia is relying more and more on nuclear weapons. Indeed, Russia recently renounced its former policy of "no first strike" with nuclear arms.

Recent U.S. military policies are making things worse. As Russia grows weaker, some of its hard-liners (the Russian equivalents of Jesse Helms) grow more paranoid about its neighbors and former enemies in the west. To some Russians, the proposed expansion of NATO to include Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic states does not necessarily seem benign.

The U.S. is continuing to try to build a scaled-down "star wars" missile defense system --in technical violation of the Antiballistic Missile Treaty --which does not necessarily look benign to everyone in Russia.[6,8]

No, current U.S. policies --which are probably primarily intended as political sops to the military corporations --do not seem likely to reduce the chances of inadvertent or accidental nuclear war. On the contrary, they seem almost certain to make the world less stable and more dangerous.

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)

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[1] Jonathan Schell, "The Case for Abolishing Nuclear Weapons," THE NATION February 2/9, 1998, pgs. 9 and following pages. Text available at http://www.thenation.com/disarmament/home_txt.htm.

[2] Lachlan Forrow and others, "Accidental Nuclear War --A Post Cold War Assessment," NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE Vol. 338, No. 18 (April 30, 1998), pgs. 1326-1331.

[3] Bruce G. Blair, Harold A. Feiveson and Frank N. von Hippel, "Taking Nuclear Weapons off Hair-Trigger Alert," SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN (November, 1997), pgs. 74-81.

[4] David Hoffman, "Cold-War Doctrines Refuse to Die.; False Alert After '95 Rocket Launch Shows Fragility of Aging Safeguards," WASHINGTON POST March 15, 1998, pg. A1.

[5] Bill Gertz, "Russian renegades pose nuke danger; CIA says arsenal lacks tight controls," WASHINGTON TIMES October 22, 1996, pg. A1.

[6] Brian Hall, "Overkill is Not Dead," NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE March 15, 1998, pg. 42.

[7] Herbert L. Abrams, "The Problem of Accidental or Inadvertent Nuclear War," PREVENTIVE MEDICINE Vol. 16 (1987), pgs. 319-333.

[8] George Lewis and Theodore Postol, "Portrait of a Bad Idea," BULLETIN OF THE ATOMIC SCIENTISTS (July/August, 1997), pgs. 18-25.

CORRECTION

Contrary to our statement in REHW #599, drinking water in the city of Ottawa, Canada is disinfected by chloramination, not ozonation.

Descriptor terms: nuclear war; russia; soviet union; ottawa, cn; drinking water; chlorination; ozonation; chloramination; accidents; radiation; military;