

Nuclear Weapons Operational Readiness/Operating Status

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In an important development, in early December 2007, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution on “Decreasing the operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems,” with 139 in favour, 3 against, and 34 abstentions. The resolution, co-sponsored by Chile, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sweden, and Switzerland, attracted controversy and attention, despite its careful wording.

The initiative was announced in Wellington by the New Zealand Minister for Disarmament Hon. Phil Goff on 30 August 2007 at a press conference with Dr. Hans Blix, Chair of the Commission on Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). It followed a strong NGO campaign on the issue of operating status and recommendations from a number of highly authoritative bodies including the WMD Commission (Recommendation 17), and an appeal signed by 44 Nobel prizewinners.

Interest in the draft UN resolution was clear from the high turn-out to a panel on operational status of nuclear weapons held on 17 October, which featured New Zealand Ambassador Don Mackay, Swedish Counselor Magnus Hellgren, and de-alerting advocates Steven Starr and John Hallam, coordinator of the 44-nobels international appeal on operational status of nuclear weapons.

(Another such panel will take place 10:00am-1:00pm on 6 May in the NGO room.)

Of particular interest and concern to the audience of diplomats, UN officials, and civil society were the reports of incidents where high alert status could have resulted in a nuclear exchange by accident or miscalculation, the information on possibilities for infiltration of nuclear command systems by terrorists, and the new models of severe climatic change from the use of even a small number of nuclear weapons.

More recently, the sponsors of the L29 resolution on operational readiness, Chile, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sweden and Switzerland, made a joint statement in the Conference on Disarmament at an informal session, in which they reiterated the importance of progress on the operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems and expressed optimism that progress on this issue may be possible.

The reason so many people have urged that nuclear weapons be taken off launch-on-warning is that there have been numerous incidents involving mishaps with nuclear command and control systems. Examples include: computer glitches; confusion regarding the close resemblance between high clouds over North Dakota and launch-to-surveillance satellites; and an incident concerning a Norwegian weather research rocket in which the ultimate issue at stake was the possible use of the core strategic inventories: the silo-based missile forces of the U.S. and Russia

Dr. Bruce Blair, former Minuteman ICBM Launch Control Officer and now President of the World Security Institute, clearly rebutted the US denial, made at the 2007 UNGA First Committee, of its having forces on 'hair-trigger alert.' Dr. Blair countered that U.S. standard operating procedures still envisage massive retaliation to a presumed strike in timeframes that allow only for rote, lightning-fast, checklist-based decision-making. Such decisions could starkly affect the survival of civilization.

Dr. Blair argued, “Both the United States and Russia today maintain about one-third of their total strategic arsenals on launch-ready alert. Hundreds of missiles armed with thousands of nuclear

warheads—the equivalent of about 100,000 Hiroshima bombs—can be launched within a very few minutes.”

Dr. Hans Kristensen, Director of the Nuclear Information Project of the Federation of American Scientists, also effectively rebutted U.S. claims that U.S. nuclear forces are planned and postured to provide the President with maximum decision time and flexibility. Dr. Kristensen noted that the most important aspect of U.S. strategic planning since the end of the Cold War, the Global Strike Mission, deepens the U.S. commitment to keep U.S. nuclear forces on high-alert. In fact, it even includes the possibility of the pre-emptive use of U.S. nuclear forces against adversaries (nuclear and non-nuclear) perceived to be planning the use of WMD.

Recent and previous work on the climatic effects of nuclear exchanges suggest that major climatic impacts from a nuclear exchange start with less than 200–400 warheads used for the destruction of cities. The “climate effects” paper you will hear later on will give more of the details that are literally chilling. The most recent work by Mills and Toon on a hypothetical India-Pakistan nuclear exchange suggests that as few as 100 warheads used for the destruction of large cities will have a massive global climatic impact.

The possible use of between tens, and thousands, of nuclear warheads, as a consequence of madness, malice, miscalculation, or malfunction is both a catastrophe beyond imagination, and is completely avoidable.

Coordinated actions and agreements to lower the operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems would be both a major step toward the goal of nuclear weapons abolition and a vital interim measure that would vastly decrease the likelihood of an accidental end to civilisation. So would taking other measures that would decrease the chance of accidental nuclear weapons use, such as the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding establishing a strategic stability centre, three times announced by the US and Russian governments but never implemented.

Unfortunately the recent 'strategic framework' document issued by Presidents Putin and Bush in Sochi does nothing to advance this particular issue, though it talks of a post-START agreement. The incorporation of measures to lower the risk of nuclear weapons use into a post-START agreement would be helpful.

I urge everyone here who takes seriously the preambles of so many resolutions in which nuclear weapons are said to be a threat to human survival, to give the issue of operating status or operational readiness the highest priority.

I especially urge them to lend their governments' authority both to the efforts by Chile, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sweden, and Switzerland, and to the efforts of other governments—India, Japan, NAM—to press for a lowering in operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems. This is a call that needs to be made in NPT Prepcom working papers and in end of the year statements to the General Assembly as well as in votes. To this end, there needs to be maximum cooperation between different groups.

I also particularly urge both official nuclear weapons states and others that have nuclear weapons systems to take on board repeated votes by UN bodies and to revise their doctrines and operational procedures so that the “notice to fire” of nuclear weapons systems is measured in days, weeks and months rather than minutes, and to take whatever other measures will avoid an accidental apocalypse.

I conclude by reminding us all that the only truly safe nuclear weapon is one that does not exist.

