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NUKE NIGHTMARE

Homeland security not inspiring confidence

Homeland defense is a major undertaking and, we are told repeatedly by our government, it's also a top priority.

But a year on from the terrible attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, there's some alarming absurdity amid the talk of security.

For example, a new report by the Project on Government Oversight says security guards at only one out of four nuclear power plants are confident their plant could defeat a terrorist attack. POGO is a Washington-based watchdog group that has neither an anti nor a pro nuclear energy position.

The group has been looking at security issues at nuclear plants since before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. Partly because of that work, it has the cooperation of a number of industry insiders, including security guards.

More than 20 security guards protecting 24 nuclear reactors (located at 13 plants) were interviewed for the report, and their identity is being protected.

Beth Daley, POGO's director of communication, said because industry insiders cooperated with the study on condition of anonymity, she could not reveal whether nuclear plants in Texas were a part of the study. "I can tell you, however, that we looked at facilities in each of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's four regions," she said.

Among the concerns:

- Prior to 9/11, the NRC required only five to 10 security guards on duty per nuclear reactor. Since then, the NRC has ordered the utilities to minimally increase the guard force. But more than half the guards POGO interviewed say their plants are relying on increased overtime of the existing guard force and fatigue issues are a factor.

- Nuclear industry executives have repeatedly claimed that guards receive 270 hours of training before being posted; 90 hours per year to re-qualify with their weapons; and 30 hours per year in anti-terrorist tactical exercises. None of these claims appears to be true. Most guards interviewed train with their weapons only once per year for two to three hours during their annual weapons qualification.

- Nearly all of the guards interviewed raised concerns about the lack of guidance on the use of deadly force. Guards are currently restricted from using deadly force unless an intruder is wielding a weapon or threatening the life of an individual. If a suicidal terrorist with a backpack (possibly containing explosives) jumped the fence and headed straight for a spent fuel pool or reactor, the guard could only observe and report

the event. One guard summed up the problem, stating: "If you pull the trigger, you're on your own and you'll need a good lawyer."

Consider the testimony of Danielle Brian, executive director of POGO, before the U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee earlier this year.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission requires the nation's nuclear facilities to protect against a specified level of threat, known as the Design Basis Threat (or DBT), from outside attackers and inside conspirators using a specific set of weapons.

The DBT requires protection against only three outside attackers with the help of one passive insider, according to published sources. This is absurd, pointed out Brian, and given what we now know about the coordination and sophistication of the 19 Sept. 11 hijackers, it's dangerously absurd.

Most of the security guards at such facilities are armed only with sidearms. And the current DBT, Brian testified, does not require protection against some of the most dangerous weapons that are available on the open market today, such as .50-caliber API sniper rounds that can penetrate hardened guard posts and vehicles. Nor do they use simulated chemical or biological agents that would require the guard force to be trained with gas masks.

In some instances, it has been reported, the guards are paid less than janitors at facilities.

Efforts to beef up these failings so far have not materialized.

Even so, almost half the nuclear power plants cannot even protect against the current inadequate standard. David Orrik, the head of the Operational Safeguards Response Evaluation program, testified before the House Commerce Committee last April that in 46 percent of the force-on-force security tests, "the expert NRC team identified a significant weakness — significant being defined as the adversary team simulating sabotaging a target set, which would lead to core damage and in many cases, to a probable radioactive release. It is important to note that, even with adequate time for the plants to prepare and make themselves ready for the OSRE, that 46 percent still had a weakness in armed response."

And, Brian cautioned the Senate committee, the test drills are continually "seriously dumbed down to favor the guard forces."

This array of issues paints a frightening portrait of what could happen if they are not urgently addressed. Homeland security efforts are not inspiring confidence.