



Y-12 bombs security exercise

Nuclear-weapons plant vulnerable to terrorists, oversight group says

By FRANK MUNGER, munger@knews.com, January 16, 2004

OAK RIDGE - The Y-12 nuclear weapons plant is vulnerable to terrorist attack, and the results could be devastating, a government watchdog group said Thursday.

The Project On Government Oversight said Y-12 failed to protect its nuclear materials last month during a high-level security exercise, underscoring concerns about Y-12 and its vast cache of bomb-grade uranium.

If terrorists were to gain access to one of a half-dozen facilities where Y-12 stores enriched uranium, they could build and explode a nuclear bomb within minutes, said Pete Stockton, senior investigator for POGO.

Y-12 manufactures components for nuclear warheads, and the Oak Ridge plant is the nation's principal storehouse for weapons-usable uranium.

There is some debate about the potential yield of a crude, quickly assembled nuclear device, but Stockton said that's not the point.

"Whether it's the size of the Hiroshima bomb or some percentage of that, it would really make a mess," he said in a phone interview from his Washington office.

Officials at the U.S. Department of Energy and the National Nuclear Security Administration, the sub-unit of DOE that manages Y-12 and other weapons facilities, would not comment directly on results of the security review.

Joe Davis, DOE's deputy press secretary in Washington, said POGO did not have first-hand knowledge of security activities at Y-12. "Anything that POGO says is second- and third-hand," Davis said.

Davis said the security review at Y-12 is not yet complete. He also he's restricted on what he can say because of classified information.

But he emphasized that DOE's Office of Security and Performance Assurance regularly tests security at all the government's weapons facilities, including Y-12. "Sometimes our facilities do great, and sometimes they show need for improvements," he said.

The reason for testing, he said, is to make security better.

According to information distributed by POGO, the results of the Y-12 security exercise were "pretty ugly." The group quoted unnamed government sources.

In the wake of the review at Y-12, the National Nuclear Security Administration shuffled staff in its Oak Ridge office and took a number of steps to strengthen the security operations.

Bill Brumley, the NNSA chief in Oak Ridge, confirmed that Sharon Daly, the assistant manager in charge of security, was given an assignment focusing on technical aspects of security operations. Ken Ivey, who formerly headed the safety oversight at Y-12, will assume the top security job on an acting basis.

Brumley said the changes also include new security staff coming to Oak Ridge from other sites, such as the Pantex weapons-assembly plant in Texas.

The federal official said these actions were "indirectly" associated with the security review at Y-12, but he praised Daly's security knowledge and insisted that her reassignment was not a demotion or punitive in nature.

Brumley said the security review at Y-12 took place over a period of about 2 1/2 months, concluding in mid-December. He said Oak Ridge officials currently are performing a "factual-accuracy review" of the security report.

POGO said the Y-12 review showed the plant's security forces could not adequately defend the enormous stockpiles of uranium at the site. The watchdog group said Y-12 has six "material access areas" where uranium is stored.

Stockton said the multiple storage areas pose a special concern because terrorists could use diversion tactics to start a ruckus in one area and gain access to another. The entire event could take place within minutes, he said, noting that some storage areas are a short distance from the plant's fences.

The POGO investigator has been tracking security issues at federal facilities for decades. He previously worked for U.S. Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., and the House subcommittee on oversight and investigations.

There has been increasing recognition of the security problem associated with INDs, improvised nuclear devices, Stockton said. Unlike radiation-dispersal devices or so-called dirty bombs, INDs would be actual bombs that detonate and cause great damage and distribution of radioactivity, he said.

DOE officials have known about the threat at nuclear plants for a long time but have tried to keep the information secret within the department, he said.

The threat has forced federal and contractor officials to revise their security plans, Stockton said.

At one time, security response at Y-12 and other nuclear facilities was based on containing the terrorists once inside a facility, but now the emphasis has shifted to access denial, he said.

"When the bad guys get in and you can't get them out, you've lost," Stockton said.

Brumley declined to discuss improvised nuclear devices or how that threat has affected security planning in Oak Ridge.

Last fall, he gave Wackenhut Services Inc., the Oak Ridge security contractor, "outstanding" performance marks and praised the security police for their work in the first half of fiscal 2003.

Asked if his opinion of the security contractor's performance had changed, Brumley declined to comment.

BWXT, manager of the Y-12 National Security Complex, currently is planning a new storage facility to consolidate and better protect the strategic nuclear materials. The storage vaults reportedly would be hardened sufficiently to withstand the impact of an airplane crash.

Stockton said the project could be a partial solution to the Y-12 vulnerability. But he questioned whether the uranium storehouse would actually be constructed. He said DOE has been talking about such an Oak Ridge facility for the past 20 years.

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