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Group Says Test of Nuclear Plant's Security Was Too Easy

By MATTHEW L. WALD

WASHINGTON, Sept. 15 — A mock attack to test security at the Indian Point nuclear plant this summer used too few attackers and assumed they would not have access to some commercially available weapons, according to a nonprofit group here that has reported extensively on reactor security.

The group, the Project on Government Oversight, also complained in a letter to the chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission that three drills were held at Indian Point, in Westchester County, N.Y., but all were during the day, an unlikely time for terrorists to attack.

In two of the drills, the letter said, "the mock terrorists crossed open fields in broad daylight in order to reach the protected area, making it that much easier for them to be observed by the security officers." And the drill was announced in advance, the letter complained.

But commission officials said that they could not respond in detail to many of the points in the letter without compromising security.

Roy P. Zimmerman, the director of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's office of nuclear security and incident response, said the agency would not talk about "anything that

Was a mock attack on Indian Point tough enough?

would give a sense of what the security guards at the plant need to protect against."

The commission said that Indian Point had passed the test, which began at the end of July and ran for several days.

A member of the commission, Edward McGaffigan Jr., said that one purpose of the drill was to test Indian Point, but that another was to see if the drills themselves could be improved. The commission would consider nighttime drills, he said, but safety was the first priority. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, he said, "doesn't like us having a bunch of people with broken ankles." And the mock adversaries did not want to surprise unsuspecting guards, who were armed with rifles, he said.

Mr. McGaffigan praised the operators of Indian Point for volunteering for the drill, and said the defenders had performed well in the tests. "In-

dian Point is our star; it did famously," he said.

Early this year, the commission ordered the resumption of the drills, known as force-on-force tests, which had been suspended after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and rewrote its design basis threat. The design basis threat is defined by a classified document that lists the number of attackers, their skills and equipment that nuclear plants must defend against.

But the letter from the Project on Government Oversight, which was prepared in part by Peter Stockton, a senior investigator with the group and a former security adviser to the federal energy secretary, complained that the new design basis threat involved a small number of attackers, "barely above the much-ridiculed earlier N.R.C. design basis threat of three attackers." He said that when the Army plans for attacks against a target, it is defending, it assumes there will be 12 attackers; the Navy assumes there will be 14.

In addition, according to the letter, the drills did not take account of adversaries carrying easily available weapons like .50-caliber sniper rifles with armor-piercing incendiary rounds, or rocket-propelled grenades, which are illegal in the United

States but widely available outside the country. Commission officials said they could not confirm or deny what was in the design basis threat.

Mr. McGaffigan said that there were limits to the armaments that private security forces should be allowed to have. "You can have diving commercial airliners in the design basis threat, but you can't give surface-to-air missiles to the guards," he said. The purpose of the defenses, commission officials stressed, was to hold off the attackers until the state police and other authorities arrived.

The letter from the watchdog group took issue with a letter sent by the commission in August to Senator Charles E. Schumer of New York and others that said that Indian Point had a strong defensive capability. In a telephone interview today, Mr. Schumer said that he was disappointed in the test.

"Any test that doesn't rely on the elements of surprise is completely suspect, and I wish they'd do another one," he said. Referring to the Project on Government Oversight's letter, he said, "I agree with the thrust of the letter."

"They should check the worst-case scenario, not the best-case scenario," he said.