

The New York Times

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FRIDAY, AUGUST 6, 2004

A13

Battle Swirls On Security At A-Plants

Issue Is Dual Role Of One Company

By MATTHEW L. WALD

WASHINGTON, Aug. 5 — The nuclear power industry's trade association has hired the company that guards half of the nation's civilian reactors to train and manage "adversary teams" that attack the plants in drills.

The decision, by the Nuclear Energy Institute, has drawn the disapproval of a government watchdog that has issued several reports in recent years critical of security at nuclear power and weapons plants.

"It is not an apparent conflict of interest, but a blatant conflict of interest," Danielle Brian, executive director of that group, the Project on Government Oversight, said of the company's dual roles in a letter to the chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

The added responsibilities of the company, the Wackenhut Corporation, were posted on the trade association's Web site in June but were little noticed until recently. They have led Peter D. H. Stockton, a security adviser to the secretary of energy in the Clinton administration and now the security expert for Ms. Brian's group, to complain that the attackers' trainers should be hired by the regulatory commission.

"This is a governmental function," Mr. Stockton said.

The industry group defended its decision, saying uniform selection and training by Wackenhut, which already performs attacking and defending roles at nuclear weapons plants, would improve standardization of security tests.

And, said Stephen D. Floyd, the association's vice president for regulatory affairs, while grading the tests is a government function, playing attacker is not.

"These folks are nothing more than players," Mr. Floyd said.

At the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Roy P. Zimmerman, director of the Office of Nuclear Security and Incident Response, said the companies that operate the reactors, and the commission itself, would be looking for any sign of cheating and that the choice of Wackenhut was not a problem for his agency.

"Tapping that pool of experience is not a surprise to us," Mr. Zimmerman said.

Eleven months ago, the Government Accountability Office, then called the General Accounting Office, issued a report that said attackers in security exercises were often undertrained and unarmed, while the defenders were unrealistically overstuffed. The attacking team in those exercises sometimes included guard trainers or off-duty guards from the plant being tested, or guards borrowed from other plants.

Mr. Floyd acknowledged that until now, most of the attackers had had training only in defense. In contrast, he said, Wackenhut, a subsidiary of Group 4 Securicor, a leading security services company based in Britain, is providing two trainers with extensive expertise in "hand-to-hand combat, urban assault, terrorist training, small arms and munitions" — the skills required, he said, to see if the defenders can withstand an attack of the kind envisioned by the regulatory commission.

But Wackenhut has had problems in running drills at weapons plants. In January, the inspector general of the Energy Department said that at Oak Ridge, Tenn., where the government stores weapons-grade uranium, Wackenhut attackers had told Wackenhut defenders which buildings were to be attacked, the targets at those buildings and whether a diversionary tactic would be used. The inspector general, Gregory H. Friedman, said the internal leaks raised doubts about the value of the tests.

Mr. Floyd said that for the tests at the civilian reactors, Wackenhut employees had signed nondisclosure agreements and were subject to dismissal if they violated them.

Representative Edward J. Markey, a Massachusetts Democrat who has focused on security issues at nuclear plants for more than 20 years, said allowing Wackenhut to test security at plants where it is the security contractor was like letting athletes conduct their own drug tests.

Mr. Markey said public confidence would be undermined both by that step and by the commission's decision, announced Wednesday, to keep reactor-security lapses secret so as not to alert terrorists to them.

The commission recently decided to step up the pace of "force on force" tests, and plans to conduct one every three years at each plant starting this fall. The adversaries use weapons that resemble laser tag guns.