

Weapons plant unsafe

Pantex workers exposed to radioactive dust

WASHINGTON (AP)—Workers at the Pantex nuclear weapons plant were exposed for years to depleted uranium dust without being aware of its radioactive hazard, says a congressional study that criticizes the Amarillo facility for persistent health and safety problems.

Pantex, the nation's only final assembly plant for nuclear bombs and missile warheads, was cited in the General Accounting Office study for having one of the worst occupational safety records in the Energy Department's weapons complex.

GAO also cited the plant for deficiencies in its radiation protection program and said two accidents resulting in workers be-

ing exposed to tritium and depleted uranium raise questions about the adequacy of Pantex's attention to safety and health.

"The situation at Pantex indicates that the message of improved safety that DOE Secretary (James) Watkins has been trying to communicate to the nuclear weapons complex has not spread to Pantex," said Rep. Mike Synar, D-Okla., who requested the GAO investigation.

DOE spokesman Harry Phillips said he could not comment on the report because he had not seen it. Synar, chairman of the Government Operations Subcommittee on Environment, Energy and Natural Resources, re-

leased the study late Monday.

GAO, the congressional watchdog agency, said the Energy Department cannot be sure the plant is operating safely because it has completed fewer than half of its safety analysis reports. Those reports, GAO said, should have been completed years ago.

The "persistent safety and health problems" at Pantex clearly support the need for external oversight of the plant's safety, GAO said, and the decision to exclude Pantex from the Independent Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board might warrant a renewed examination of the issue.

Congressional staff told GAO

that Pantex was excluded from the board's oversight when it was established in 1988 because Pantex was considered a relatively safe operation. There was also concern that allowing outside review of a plant that assembled nuclear weapons would result in security risks.

"However, these circumstances have changed since 1988 because safety and health problems have surfaced at Pantex and outside agencies ... have conducted inspections at Pantex," the report said.

Rep. Bill Sarpalius, D-Amarillo, said he would support having Pantex subject to the board's oversight.

Military hopes victory will increase funding

WASHINGTON (AP) — While Pentagon officials have trimmed their shopping lists in deference to the reduced Soviet threat and budget realities, they remain hopeful that the victory in the Persian Gulf will translate into more money for a handful of major weapons systems.

Defense Secretary Dick Cheney has emphasized there will be no backsliding on post-Cold War defense cutbacks that through 1995 will reduce the active force of 2 million by 500,000 and cut Air Force tactical fighter wings from 36 to 26.

Pentagon officials and independent defense experts agree that while the successes of Desert Storm might add a few years of life to some existing weapons programs and enhance the prospects of a few future projects, there will be no homecoming spending binge as a consequence of the military's newly won prestige.

Such stars of the victory over Iraq as the F-15 and F-16 fighters, the AH-64 Apache attack helicopter, the Navy's A-6 attack plane, the F-117A stealth fighter-bomber and the A-10 Warthog anti-tank plane already have gone out of production or soon will do so.

The M-1 Abrams tank and the Bradley fighting vehicle also are heading for oblivion, unless their manufacturers can maneuver through the political minefields of finding foreign buyers.

Cheney said the value of stealth technology "was reaffirmed in very significant ways" by the radar-piercing performance of the F-117.

That, he said, persuaded him to pursue development of the B-2 stealth bomber, which has a far bigger payload and greater range than the F-117 and is designed to replace the elderly B-52 as the nation's mainstay bomber.

But the B-2 also costs \$865 million a plane, compared with \$106 million for the F-117, and Congress has only grudgingly approved production of 15 of the 75 wanted by the Air Force.

One clear winner from the Gulf War was Joint STARS, a surveillance system using redesigned Boeing 707s that allows the Air Force to monitor and transmit to ground troops the activities of enemy forces hundreds of miles away.

The House Armed Services Committee, saying there was no longer a threat of a Soviet land attack, last summer voted to delete \$300 million from this year's budget, in effect canceling the \$6 billion J-STARS program. The budget was restored in October, and now the Air Force might get more than the 20 planes it has ordered through 2001.

Another aircraft that might have eluded the congressional scrap heap is the C-17, the designated replacement for the C-141 transport plane.

The \$35 billion project for 120 C-17s has been jeopardized by allegations that McDonnell-Douglas is behind schedule and way over budget, but the war demonstrated the urgency of improving America's air and sea lift capabilities.

Peace talk future looking good

JERUSALEM (AP) — Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir on Sunday expressed optimism about the direction of the U.S. drive for peace in the Middle East, and predicted Secretary of State James A. Baker III will return for more talks.

"The talks are at their height," Shamir told Israel radio. "There are certain achievements, and agreements are lacking on some points."

"I don't think we are in a crisis ... the time has not come for despair on this matter," he said.

Baker abruptly ended his third Mideast peace trip on Friday af-

ter learning of the death of his 96-year-old mother.

He later issued a statement saying he still needed some answers from Israel and would meet with President Bush to decide the next step in peace process.

Some observers interpreted the statement as meaning Baker might call off the U.S. drive for peace.

Baker has made three trips to the Middle East in the last seven weeks with little apparent result.

Shamir, in his radio interview, said his government would not change its view that a peace con-

ference could only meet once then break up into bilateral talks.

Israeli news reports said Shamir took Foreign Minister David Levy to task during a Sunday Cabinet meeting for suggesting Israel might consider reconvening the conference every six months to hear progress reports

on talks with individual Arab states.

Levy, speaking on Israel army radio, said his critics were backing away from something already agreed to by Israeli leaders.

"There is nothing I brought up to Baker during our talks that was not known to the prime minister, and all these cries of despair, all those who are getting cold feet, can not distort the picture," Levy said.

Levy insisted he had not agreed to an international peace conference.

"The talks are at their height."

— Yitzhak Shamir, prime minister of Israel

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