

NEW NUKES? BUSH Increases Budget for Nuclear Weapon “Studies”

The Bush Administration has requested \$6.6 billion for nuclear weapons maintenance, research and development in its 2005 budget. This money includes researching low-yield "mini-nukes," which had been banned since 1994 until Congress lifted the prohibition last year. Nuclear monies are also intended for the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator, a "bunker buster" weapon that has a yield, approximately 15 times greater than that of the bomb that obliterated Hiroshima. While the money is technically for studying these weapons, a recently leaked report from the Congressional Research Service said the sharp budget increase suggests the government plans to secretly build these weapons as well. Bush also requested money to decrease the time needed to prepare for a full-scale underground nuclear test, from 36 months to 24 months. This would be the first nuclear test explosion by the U.S. since 1992.

BUSH WEAPONS TESTING: LEAVE NO NUKE BEHIND

This month, the United States is conducting another subcritical nuclear test at the Nevada Test Site, under the code name UNICORN-1.

Before the signing of the 1963 Partial Test-Ban Treaty, the U.S., British and Soviet governments detonated 550 nuclear bombs in the atmosphere, poisoning the Earth with radioactive fallout. That treaty banned all nuclear test explosions above ground, but the three leading nuclear-weapons states continued to test bombs underground until the mid-1990s.

By the time the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty was negotiated in 1997, the total number of nuclear tests had reached 2,050. That treaty, if it entered into force, would have prohibited all full-scale nuclear tests - above and underground. But the United States was not willing to give up the option to expand its bloated nuclear arsenal. The Clinton administration sabotaged the negotiations in Geneva in order to provide for a loophole: subcritical testing.

Nuclear weapons proponents claim that subcritical testing, a test of the weapon's vitality in which the chain reaction does not reach a critical mass (and therefore explode), is a safe and effective way of maintaining the stockpile of U.S. nuclear weapons, which now hovers around 10,000.

Activists and nuclear weapons watchdog groups argue that subcritical testing is not so innocent. "If it were safe, they would never have taken it out of the labs and put it at the test site," argues Susi Snyder, a board member of the Shundahai Network, a U.S. indigenous-led environmental justice organization based in Nevada. "Subcritical tests leave pounds of plutonium only 100 feet from southern Nevada's largest water supply. Only one pound of plutonium, if evenly distributed in the atmosphere, would cause cancer in every living thing in the world."

Once the United States succeeded in exempting subcritical testing from the treaty, India, which has had nuclear weapons since 1972, opted out of the negotiations and detonated an atmospheric test in 1998. Pakistan, determined not to seem threatened by India's nuclear might, followed suit shortly thereafter.

Under various legal commitments, such as the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the International Court of Justice's 1996 advisory opinion on nuclear weapons, and numerous United Nations General Assembly resolutions, all nuclear weapons states are obliged to dismantle their nuclear arsenals irreversibly and verifiably. The U.S. Senate rejected the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty in 1999, the only legislative body in the world to do so.