

LIFE EXTENSION PROGRAMS



In the mid-1990's the Department of Energy (DOE) embarked upon "Life Extension Programs" (LEPs) to refurbish and extend the "shelf life" of existing nuclear weapons. Under the LEPs, warheads in the current arsenal are disassembled, parts are refurbished or replaced with new components, and the warheads are reassembled and redeployed.

The purpose of the Life Extension Programs is to maintain an enduring nuclear arsenal. "Life Extension" adds at least 35-40 years to a warhead's usable life, according to DOE (one official has been quoted at 100-120 years), and addresses aging issues of "limited life components." LEP activities involve various parts of the warhead, from new or refurbished secondaries to the arming, fusing and firing mechanisms (LEPs do not involve new plutonium pit "triggers," although "non-intrusive" work is done on existing pits).

A NEW BOMB?

Under Life Extension Programs, DOE plans to upgrade every type of nuclear warhead in the planned United States arsenal. Upgrades have already been done on the W87 warhead and are nearing completion on the B61.

Upgrades of the W76 warhead are slated to begin in 2008. Modifications to the W76 are so extensive that it is being given a new number: the W76-1/Mk4A. A new fuse that allows for a ground burst capability and strongly improved accuracy for the reentry vehicle fundamentally change the military application of this Trident submarine warhead—it can now be used on "hard targets." The Bush Administration recently decided to convert 2,4000 W76 warheads to W76-Is.

Congress refused to fund production of the last two new nuclear warheads proposed by DOE—the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator ("Bunker Buster") and the Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW). It seems DOE is now making an end run around the Congressional rejection of new nuclear weapons by modifying the W76 through its Life Extension Program.

LEP AND NUCLEAR POLICY

While refusing to fund the RRW last year, Congress called for a new assessment of U.S. policy which would include examination of the number of nuclear weapons needed and the role that nonproliferation programs should play in national security. At the same time, national security, military, arms control and diplomatic leaders are calling for the U.S. and other nations to develop a concrete plan for nuclear disarmament and have proposed nine practical steps that can be taken immediately. This new environment is likely to result in plans

Recommendations

- Increase funding and augment capacity for dismantlement of warheads.
- Halt the W76 Life Extension Program until a Nuclear Posture Review is completed.

for a dramatically reduced nuclear arsenal and call into question the continuation of Life Extension Programs. If the U.S. embarks on a course towards a nuclear weapons free world, as former government officials at the highest levels have now called for, it makes no sense to spend billions upgrading current warheads.

FINANCIAL COSTS

This year (FY 2008) the LEP budget is \$234 million; for FY 2009: \$211 million. The decrease reflects the completion of the B61 LEP, but the W76 LEP is now ramping up. Additional monies may be included in other parts of the DOE budget.

At the same time, DOE is in the middle of a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for "Complex Transformation." The estimated cost for refurbishing the nuclear weapons complex is more than \$150 billion. Despite claims that the overall "footprint" of the complex will be reduced, the eight production sites will all add manufacturing facilities in order to construct new design nuclear weapons. This plan is in addition to the current Life Extension programs which are already in place and the Stockpile Stewardship Programs that annually certify that the nuclear arsenal is safe and secure.

ALTERNATIVES

What happens to the U.S. arsenal if we don't do life extensions? Practically speaking, essentially nothing. DOE has never identified an uncorrectable aging issue in the nuclear arsenal that would compromise the ability of weapons to "function as designed." Eventually, surveillance may discover an aging anomaly that would call a warhead's reliability into question. By then, the U.S. should be retiring warheads as it meets its obligations under the Nonproliferation Treaty. In contrast, DOE asserts the only viable alternative to life extension for current warheads is building new bombs—the Reliable Replacement Warheads. Whether by LEP or the RRW program, planning for maintenance of a modernized nuclear arsenal for many decades to come is contrary to our Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) disarmament obligation.

NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION IMPACTS

In 1969, the United States ratified the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. In return for most countries' agreement not to acquire nuclear weapons, the United States and other nuclear powers agreed to pursue in good faith negotiations on cessation of the nuclear arms race "at an early date" and on nuclear disarmament, i.e. the elimination of nuclear weapons. In 1996, the International Court of Justice ruled that this means the nuclear weapon states must achieve nuclear disarmament. Former U.S. nonproliferation diplomat Thomas Graham has said: "The nuclear weapon states have never really delivered on the disarmament part of this bargain, and in recent years it appears to have been largely abandoned."

DOE asserts that the Life Extension Programs do not violate the NPT because they do not build new bombs. Yet Mohammed ElBaradei, director of the International Atomic Energy Agency and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, says: "I do not believe this is consistent with their obligations under the nuclear nonproliferation treaty."

The pursuit of an enduring nuclear arsenal through Life Extension Programs contradicts the NPT bargain and thereby undermines U.S. efforts to curb nuclear weapons proliferation. In some cases, it may induce other nations to pursue a nuclear weapon capability to defend themselves.

