



Nuclear Free Local Authorities Steering Committee

information

NFLA joint media release with Nukewatch - for immediate release, 13th June 2013 Scotland left to fend for itself during nuclear weapons accident exercise

Delays and mistakes made during a major accident exercise involving a nuclear weapon would have resulted in Scotland being left to fend for itself by Whitehall government departments during a critical period in the handling of the emergency, according to an official report (1).

No official information about the disaster would have been available to the public for several hours after the accident, and disorganisation and delays in the medical response to the emergency meant that a seriously injured casualty who might otherwise have survived would have died.

The catalogue of errors is revealed in an internal Ministry of Defence report released on the handling of Exercise Senator 2011 – a rehearsal of arrangements for tackling an emergency involving a British nuclear weapon being transported along Scotland's roads to the Trident nuclear submarine base on the Clyde. The report was released to the convoy monitoring group 'Nukewatch' (2) following a request made under the Freedom of Information Act.

The real-life exercise took place at HMS Gannet, Prestwick Airport, Ayrshire, in September 2011, role-playing an imaginary accident involving a nuclear weapons convoy which took place on the M74 near junction 5 at Motherwell – one of Scotland's busiest sections of motorway.

Under the accident scenario, the emergency occurred when a large goods vehicle travelling north on the motorway suffered a front tyre blowout, causing it to crash through the central reservation into a nuclear weapons convoy. A truck loaded with Trident nuclear warheads swerved to avoid the accident and tipped over onto its side, and as a goods vehicle carrying road-surfacing equipment swerved to avoid the accident, its load broke loose and collided with another warhead carrier.

Two casualties died immediately as a result of the accident, seven more were injured, and between 50 and 100 drivers caught up in the incident were contaminated by radioactive material released as nuclear warheads burnt in the fire caused by the accident. A plume of radioactivity drifted away from the accident scene placing nearby homes and property at risk.

An exercise evaluation report prepared by the Defence Nuclear Safety Regulator (DNSR) concluded that there was “essentially no MOD input to (and certainly no presence at)” the main strategic emergency control centre until Ministry of Defence co-ordinating personnel arrived five and a half hours after the accident - “a realistic timescale for an accident in Scotland”.

The lack of support from MoD created “major difficulties for the multi-agency response, which struggled to attain a meaningful understanding of the issues”. DNSR concluded that the lack of support “over such an extended and critical period” was “not acceptable”.

Scientific and technical advice provided by MoD to local civil agencies was also deemed “not adequate”, with “no apparent leadership or structure” and “repeated changes in representation” from MoD staff responsible for providing technical information, who at times disputed advice provided by local agencies.

The accident site response for treating casualties “became disorganised”, and it was “less than clear who was in charge” of medical arrangements at the scene. There was “considerable delay” in developing a plan to manage casualties contaminated with radioactivity and “significant further delay” in getting agreement to send paramedics into the contaminated area to receive casualties. As a

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result of the delays, exercise controllers declared that a seriously injured casualty, who might otherwise have survived, had died.

Personnel tasked with briefing the media about the incident were misdirected to the wrong location, “which delayed any effective media response by several hours”, meaning that in a real life accident, no official information or safety advice would have been provided by the government to the media and the public.

The police were formally alerted to the accident by a fax message sent to the police headquarters. This led the exercise assessors to drily conclude that “arrangements for providing the initial written alert to the police are not adequate”.

Over 1000 personnel from 21 different government agencies took part in the exercise at various locations across Central Scotland and elsewhere in the UK, and the exercise was observed by nuclear weapons specialists from the USA and France.

Several of the government agencies which participated in the event were critical of the MoD's preparations for the exercise, with the Scottish Government commenting that “exercise instructions were sent out too late by MoD and arrangements were finalised too late”, impacting on the level of Scottish Government involvement in the exercise. Other agencies complained that no funding had been provided by the Ministry of Defence to run the exercise and that the exercise play had started before all agencies had arrived at the mock accident site. As a result, DNSR concluded that “more systematic arrangements are required for exercise planning, particularly when engaging with many agencies.”

Councillor Bill Butler, Chair of the Nuclear Free Local Authorities (NFLA) Scotland Forum (3) said: “To hear that in this exercise the Ministry of Defence was not advising senior emergency service and local authority representatives for a large amount of time, that public information provision was poor, and that the Ambulance Service were not able to deal with radioactively contaminated casualties, sounds the alarm that emergency planning arrangements may not be as robust as they should be.

“I urge the Ministry of Defence to take the outcomes of this exercise very seriously and work more closely with local authorities and the emergency services to resolve these planning gaps”.

Jane Tallents of Nukewatch, the national network which monitors the transport of nuclear weapons said: “Far from being a benign 'insurance policy' keeping the public safe, nuclear weapons actually increase the risks that we all face.

“This exercise shows that, at the height of the crisis, Scotland would be left to fend for itself by Whitehall in the event of an emergency involving a British nuclear weapon.

“The Ministry of Defence should not be moving nuclear weapons around the roads on convoys if it doesn't take emergency planning seriously and organise exercises properly”. (4) (5)

Ends

For more information please contact:

Nukewatch: Jane Tallents on 07778 267833 or 01968 677401.

Nuclear Free Local Authorities: Sean Morris on 07771 930196 or 0161 234 3244.

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Notes for editors:

- (1) Documents relating to Exercise Senator 2011 released under the Freedom of Information Act are available to download at <http://www.nuclearinfo.org/article/transport/scotland-left-fend-itself-during-nuclear-weapons-accident-exercise>
- (2) Nukewatch is a national campaign network which monitors the transport of nuclear weapons through the UK. For more details please see www.nukewatch.org.uk
- (3) Nuclear Free Local Authorities (NFLA) is the local government voice on nuclear issues – a cross-party group of around fifty local councils which tackles in practical ways, and within their powers, the problems posed by civil and military nuclear hazards. For more information please see www.nuclearpolicy.info
- (4) Video footage of the nuclear weapons convoy from the 'Nukewatch / Camcorder Guerrillas' film 'Deadly Cargo' is available online for use by the media at: <http://vimeo.com/20872194>
- (5) Nuclear warhead convoys travel between the Royal Naval Armaments Depot Coulport in Scotland and the Atomic Weapons Establishment in Berkshire up to 6 times per year, transporting nuclear warheads for maintenance and inspection.

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