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Reference GSA/360/79

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*CDS wishes
 CDS to go
 follow up later*

THE NUCLEAR WARHEAD PROGRAMME

1. There has been much discussion recently about our nuclear warhead programme, and about priorities, timescales and resource constraints within it. It may be helpful if I summarise the action in hand.

2. We are not attempting to brief the Secretary of State for any general discussion of warhead programme issues when he visits Washington next week. We are asking him to raise the question (to which we do not expect a satisfactory answer) of a long-term US guarantee to supply us HEU for submarine propulsion; the Chiefs of Staff have seen the papers on this. We are also asking him to mention (in order to oil the wheels for staff contacts) that we shall be asking the US to help us out with supplies of certain special nuclear materials the need for which is already clear in relation to the existing defence programme. On TNF warheads, we are briefing him simply to indicate in general terms that we could not provide UK warheads for any new CM force for at least three years after the Vulcan phase-out in 1982-1983, and that the options thereafter are still being looked at.

3. CDP and I have, however, set in hand some urgent work, which should be completed in September, to clarify the main technical constraints which may impose limitations on the nuclear warhead programme in the period up to 1999. This will be primarily concerned with examining the implications of a possible production programme between 1985-95, which is likely to be the crucial period, on the basis of an illustration production target of 100 warheads a year. (The study will assume that approval will be given to a build-up of the necessary physical and manpower resources; as you will be aware a separate submission has been made to Ministers on this problem).

4. In parallel with this work the Defence Policy Staff have agreed to set in hand a paper on the scope and sequence of an illustrative programme for the introduction of weapon systems with UK warheads over the same period, (again on the assumption of 100 new warheads per year). This would be based on assumptions about the successor to Polaris, long-range TNF modernisation and the WE 177/NAST 1231 programmes. In general these assumptions would represent the "worst case", ie the choice of those systems which would place the greatest demands on the warhead production facilities.

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*10x100
 = 6000 warheads*

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without too much difficulty. Indeed because of industrial labour problems caused by low pay the delay in both tests will be a relief to them.

5. The US DOE have said that the delay in the test planned for September until early December should not entail significant additional costs at the Nevada Test Site. Our changed plans for the further test in July 1979 will require a re-estimate with the US and I am seeking from them the date by which we must make our first financial commitment. When I have this information I will advise Secretary of State and provide a draft minute to his Ministerial colleagues. Meanwhile he may wish to minute the Prime Minister along the lines of the attached draft on the December test.

V H B Macklen

6 June 1978

V H B MACKLEN
DCA(PN)

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