



Trident shiplift 'vulnerable to terror attacks'

THE danger that a 9/11-style attack on the Trident base on the Clyde could cause a major nuclear disaster has been underestimated, according to internal Ministry of Defence (MoD) documents passed to the Sunday Herald.

A risk assessment for the MoD says that the shiplift used to hoist nuclear-armed submarines out of the water at the Faslane naval dockyard would collapse if it was hit by a plane. Another study by MoD experts says that an aircraft crash could trigger "weapon ignition/detonation".

This would create "one helluva mess", according to nuclear experts, who argue that the shiplift is a prime target for terrorists because it exposes a submarine and its Trident nuclear-tipped missiles to attack. Even the Ministry of Defence accepts that an aircraft crash would be "catastrophic".

Four Vanguard-class submarines, each carrying up to 48 Trident warheads and weighing 16,000 tonnes, are regularly raised out of the water on the shiplift for maintenance. The lift is also used to service other vessels and is occupied for about 100 days a year.

Under freedom of information law, the MoD has released an accident assessment of a submarine using the facility "with its Trident weapons system on board".

The report, written by consultants Atkins in 2003, concludes that the consequences of a commercial aircraft crashing into the shiplift have previously been played down. The probability that this would cause the shiplift platform to collapse "should tend towards 1", it says, making it a virtual certainty.

The report recommends that the risks should be reassessed, including calculations of how far radioactive contamination could spread in the aftermath of an attack.

The Atkins report highlights other risks that have been underestimated. "No mention of spontaneous ignition of propellant was made", it says, despite this being "a credible hazard".

The propellant is a form of solid rocket fuel known as nitrate ester, which is classed as an explosive. Each submarine carrying Trident missiles is thought to carry propellant equivalent to 1000 tonnes of TNT.

The report also suggests that the chances of a missile accidentally exploding - known as a "cook-off" - may need to be re-evaluated. Another report, for the US House Armed Services Committee in 1990, expressed concern that a "submarine loading accident" could lead to "plutonium dispersal or possibly a nuclear yield".

According to an independent nuclear consultant, John Large, the risk was that a small nuclear explosion - a fizzle - would blast plutonium from the warheads over a huge area.

His concerns were echoed by the Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which unearthed the risk assessments.

"The MoD cannot conceal the huge shiplift at Faslane nor can it keep secret the fact that this facility is used by Trident submarines," said the group's co-ordinator, John Ainslie.

"So long as this is the case there is a real danger that a terrorist could try a September 11th style attack with catastrophic consequences."

The MoD never comments in detail on security threats, but Faslane's spokesman Neil Smith said: "Safety is always paramount and subject to rigorous checks".

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By Rob Edwards, Environment Editor

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