

US develops 'micro-nuke' weapons

Martin Walker in Washington

AERICAN scientists at the Los Alamos research laboratory are developing a new generation of miniaturised nuclear weapons, designed for use primarily in the Third World, according to Greenpeace.

The three types of new nuclear weapons, down to "micro-nukes" equivalent to only 10 tons of conventional explosives, are being justified by the Pentagon and to Congress in the light of US shortcomings in the Gulf war: the failure to hit Iraqi commanders in their bunkers and the difficulty of stopping Scud missiles.

The 10-ton micro-nuke is identified as a weapon that can "preclude sanctuary to nuclear-armed leadership", in briefings given at Los Alamos to US navy officials.

The 100-ton "mini-nuke" is described as the most efficient way to destroy incoming nuclear, chemical or biological missile warheads in flight.

The 1,000-ton "tiny-nuke" is seen as a weapon "to destroy company-size units in extreme scenarios", and as a means to "deter use of mass destruction weapons by Third World nations". The bomb dropped on Hiroshima was equivalent to about 17,000 tons of conventional explosives.

These weapons, used during conventional warfare, would blur the nuclear threshold which has never been crossed since the second world war, even though all the main nuclear powers have deployed small-scale tactical nuclear weapons for more than two decades.

These programmes are still in the research and development phase, and are being funded from allocations for the US air force and energy depart-

ment. They were described in a closed session before the Senate armed services and energy committees last March by Dr Siegfried Hecker, director of the Los Alamos laboratories, as research programmes, and they have not been stopped by Congress.

Their full development would require underground testing, and critics of the programme are concerned that this may account for the Bush administration's resistance to a comprehensive ban on nuclear testing.

"The development of these weapons goes against the national security objective of the 1990s; preventing weapons of mass destruction from proliferating to new nations," William Arkin, military research director for Greenpeace International, said yesterday.

Mr Arkin, who discovered and publicised the programmes, warned: "By contemplating the possible use of nuclear weapons in the Third World, we are giving wary nations a compelling reason to develop their own arsenals."

The micro-nukes fit neatly into the theory of nuclear weapons in the "New World Order" which was established by the strategic deterrence study group, organised by the Pentagon's joint strategic target planning staff. Known as the Reed report, after the chairman Tom Reed, it calls for a US nuclear posture aimed at deterring emergent nuclear weapon states which "seek to deter the US and other powers from interfering with their regional aggressions".

The Los Alamos team say existing US tactical nuclear weapons are too powerful, so they "self-deter" US policymakers from using them. They say the micro-, mini- and tiny-nukes, which are low-yield weapons, would give defence planners more options.