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Blair Determined to Keep Britain's Nuclear Weapons

By AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, LONDON

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said Oct. 19 that a nuclear deterrent remained a key part of Britain's defense, despite being useless against terrorism.

"We're committed to retaining the UK's independent nuclear deterrent," Blair said in reply to a question in parliament on whether he intended to replace the ageing Trident submarine-launched nuclear-tipped ballistic missile system.

"Although I don't think anyone pretends that the independent nuclear deterrent is a defense against terrorism, nonetheless I do believe it's an important part of our defense."

He admitted that the decision was looming before May 2010 but said that lawmakers would be given the chance to have their say on replacing Trident before the government decides if it will proceed.

"No decisions on replacing Trident have yet been taken, but these are likely to be necessary in the current parliament. It is too early to rule in or out any particular option," he said during the weekly prime minister's question time in the House of Commons.

Blair faces mounting opposition from his fellow Labour Party lawmakers on the renewal of Britain's nuclear deterrent, notably over their cost to build.

Faced by accusations in September that he has secretly made a decision to spend up to 20 billion pounds (36 billion dollars, 30 billion euros) on a replacement system, Defense Secretary John Reid insisted: "It is not a decision about which I have received any advice, papers, options or made any decisions."

Britain has four Trident submarines in service: Her Majesty's Ships Vanguard, Victorious, Vigilant and Vengeance. They each have 16 multiple warhead nuclear missiles with a range of 12,000 kilometres (7,500 miles).

HMS Vanguard successfully fired an unarmed Trident II D5 missile on October 11 during a naval exercise in the Atlantic Ocean.

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