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Congress Cool to Nuclear Warhead Plan

Friday March 30, 2007 3:01 AM

By H. JOSEF HEBERT

Associated Press Writer

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WASHINGTON (AP) - An administration proposal to build a new generation of more reliable nuclear warheads to replace the current stockpile was met with skepticism Thursday from key lawmakers who will decide how much money to give the program.

Rep. Pete Visclosky, D-Ind., chairman of the House Appropriations subcommittee with jurisdiction over nuclear weapons programs, said he was "troubled by the giddiness" at the Energy Department over development of the new warhead program.

The panel's ranking Republican, Rep. David Hobson, R-Ohio, said he was worried the warhead development was aimed not so much to meet the military's requirements but "to prove that we can still design nuclear weapons."

Separately, three experts on nuclear nonproliferation, including a former defense secretary and former Sen. Sam Nunn, said that building a new warhead - even if only a replacement - sends the wrong message to the world and could make all the more difficult the resolution of the nuclear problems with Iran and North Korea.

"We will pay a very high price in terms of our overall national security" because other nations will view the new U.S. warhead as a reason to proceed with nuclear weapons development, Nunn, co-chairman of the privately funded Nuclear Threat Initiative, told the lawmakers.

The Energy Department has asked for \$89 million for next fiscal year to look into the design and develop cost estimates for producing the warhead that supporters say is needed to assure future safety, reliability and security of the nuclear weapons stockpile without actual ground testing.

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From the Associated Press

Thomas D'Agostino, head of the DOE's National Nuclear Security Administration, told the subcommittee that the current, aging warheads in years to come "may pose an unacceptable risk" as to their long-term reliability without testing. D'Agostino declined to speculate how much the program might cost, saying that's what he hopes to learn over the next year.

Earlier this month, the department announced that engineers at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California would work on designing the new warheads and develop cost estimates.

D'Agostino reiterated that the new warhead would be more easily maintained, provide additional assurances of security and reliability and allow for a reduction in the number of warheads that will have to be kept in reserve.

The lawmakers said they were not convinced.

Visclosky noted that only a few years ago department officials said that its so-called "stockpile stewardship" and warhead life-extension programs could maintain and assure the reliability of the stockpile well into the next century.

Also, Hobson said, a recent conclusion by weapons experts that the plutonium pits used in warheads can be counted on to remain in good condition much longer than had been expected raises questions on the need of a new warhead design.

William Perry, a former defense secretary, said action on a new warhead could be deferred for many years without an adverse impact on the country's nuclear stockpile and would "put us in a stronger position to lead the international community in the battle against nuclear proliferation."

Richard Garwin, a nuclear physicist who was involved in developing the hydrogen bomb, questioned why a new warhead is needed to assure reliability or security.

The weapons now in the stockpile have been tests in actual detonations, Garwin said, and "with the passage of time and improvements in computing tools ... confidence in the reliability of the existing weapons will increase rather than diminished."

He said if the entire stockpile is replaced by warheads that have been never actually tested in a detonation, there eventually may be increased pressure to resume testing to make sure they work.

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