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Undeterred: Amid Terror Attacks in Europe, US H-bombs Still Deployed There

By John Laforge

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“A little more than 60 miles from Brussels airport,” Kleine Brogel Air Base is one of six European sites where the United States still stores active nuclear weapons, William Arkin wrote last month. The national security consultant for NBC News Investigates, Arkin warned that these

bombs “evade public attention to the extent that a post-terror attack nuclear scare in Belgium can occur without the bombs even being mentioned.”

At the Kleine Brogel base, there are an estimated 20 US B61 nuclear bombs to be carried and delivered by the Belgian Air Force’s F-16 fighter jets. Yet these weapons “did not come up in news coverage following the [March 22] Islamic State bombings in Brussels,” Arkin wrote for NewsVice. The B61s weren’t mentioned in reports of the shooting death of a Belgian nuclear reactor guard, Arkin said, or in stories about lax security at Belgium’s power reactors.

Today, only 180 — out of more than 7000 US nukes once deployed in Europe — are still kept at the ready: in Belgium, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, and Turkey. “And,” Arkin notes, “Soviet nuclear weapons have even been removed from Eastern Europe.” If “nuclear weapons could be removed from the Korean Peninsula, certainly they don’t need to be physically present in Europe,” he said. “Other NATO nuclear partners have denuclearized. In 2001, the last nuclear weapons were withdrawn from Greece. US nuclear weapons were even withdrawn from Britain in 2008.”

Other experts have also spotlighted what the commercial press treats as taboo terror scenarios. Hans M. Kristensen, Director of the Nuclear Information Project of the Federation of American Scientists, warned last month that, “Suspected terrorists have had their eye on one of the Italian bases [two of which house US B61 bombs], and the largest nuclear stockpile in Europe [the 90 US B61s at Incirlik] is in the middle of an armed civil uprising in Turkey less than 70 miles from war-torn Syria. Is this really a safe place to store nuclear weapons?” The answer is *No*, especially considering that since 9/11 terrorists have hit Belgium three times, Germany and Italy once each, and Turkey at least 20 times — and all four NATO partners are current B61 outposts.

Big business behind new H-bombs

Large majorities of Europeans, prominent NATO ministers and generals, and Belgian and German parliamentary resolutions have all demanded permanent removal of the B61s. The holdup is not public opinion, security needs or deterrence theory, but big business.

Nuclear Watch New Mexico reports that the US National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) receives around \$7 billion a year for maintaining and “enhancing” nuclear weapons. The Air Force wants 400-500 new B61-12s to be built, 180 of which are scheduled to replace existing versions known as the B61-3, -4, -7, -10, and -11 currently in Europe. In 2015, NNSA estimated the cost of replacing the B61s at \$8.1 billion over 12 years. Budget increases are sought every year.

Our nuclear weapons laboratories promote and feed from this gravy train, as Nuclear Watch NM notes, specifically the Sandia National Lab (a wholly owned subsidiary of Lockheed Martin Corp.) and Los Alamos National Lab, both in New Mexico, which oversee the design, manufacture and testing of the B61-12.

William Hartung, a Fellow at the Center for International Policy, reports that major weapons contractors like Bechtel and Boeing reap huge profits from weapons upgrades. Lockheed Martin

“gets two bites at the apple,” Hartung says, because it also designs and builds the F-35A fighter bomber, “which will be fitted to carry the B61-12, as will the F-15E (McDonnell Douglas), F-16 (General Dynamics), B-2A (Northrop Grumman), B-52H (Boeing), Tornado (Panavia Aircraft) and future long-range striker bombers.”

Although the United States has promised not to build new nuclear weapons, Kristensen, and Matthew McKinzie, the Nuclear Program Director at the Natural Resources Defense Council, report that, “The capability of the new B61-12 ... seems to continue to expand, from a simple life-extension of an existing bomb, to the first US guided nuclear gravity bomb, to a nuclear earth-penetrator with increased accuracy.” These complex nuclear weapons changes cost enormous amounts of tax money. And the money keeps coming because it fuels and rewards the perceived power and prestige that nuclear weapons workers carry up to corporate, academic, military and political elites.

Summer-long protests underway at Büchel Air Base, home to 20 US H-bombs

The German group Nuclear-Free Büchel has launched its 19th annual series of actions against the 20 B61 bombs deployed at Büchel Air Force Base in West-central Germany. This year’s rallying cry for the 20-week-long event: “Büchel is Everywhere.” The occupation began March 26 — the anniversary of the German Bundestag’s 2010 resolution calling for withdrawal of the B61s — and continues through Aug. 9, Nagasaki Day. Just outside the main gate, over-sized banners, placards and artwork recall a successful effort 30 years ago that ousted 96 US nuclear-armed Cruise missiles from Hunsrück, Germany: On Oct. 11, 1986, more than 200,000 people marched there against NATO plans to use nuclear detonations inside Germany against a Warsaw Pact invasion, i.e. the military genius of destroying Germany to save it. It seems the more things change...