

Idealist.ws/subcritical.php supplement:

On June 10, 1997, Greenpeace and nearly 50 peace and environmental groups signed onto the following letter, calling on the President to cancel the subcritical tests. The language of the letter was as follows:

"We strongly oppose the Department of Energy's plans to begin a series of subcritical, nuclear weapons-related experiments at the Nevada Test Site this June. We are not convinced that these controversial experiments are immediately needed to maintain the existing nuclear weapons in the U.S. stockpile. A number of eminent scientists, including the prestigious JASON group, share this view. Furthermore, we believe that these tests will be detrimental to U.S. efforts to stem the proliferation of nuclear weapons and to secure the international implementation of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

The United States will set the pace for future progress on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. In our view conducting underground experiments involving chemical high explosives and nuclear weapons-grade plutonium at the nation's nuclear test site is a provocative step in the wrong direction. The tests send the message that the United States is more interested in advancing our nuclear weapons expertise than in advancing a non-proliferation and disarmament agenda.

Worse, the subcritical experiments set a dangerous precedent for other nations to conduct similar experiments and will make the challenging task of verifying the CTBT more difficult. For instance, Russia and China could feel free to conduct underground explosive experiments at their Novaya Zemlya and Lop Nor test sites. How can we be sure that such tests would not be used for new nuclear weapons development or would not violate the zero-yield CTBT?

The recently released JASON review of the first two subcritical experiments, commissioned by the Department of Energy, states that "there is no claim that the data from these experiments are needed immediately as part of the Science Based Stockpile Stewardship and Management Program in order to retain confidence in the reliability and performance of the U.S. stockpile..." (1). This review also makes a strong case that the plutonium data nuclear weapons scientists hope to obtain in these underground experiments can be obtained through the conduct of above ground experiments. The JASONS went on to recommend that "an independent review process should also address the scientific importance and cost-effectiveness of proposed subcritical experiments." We have yet to see such a review take place.

The best course builds on the success of the CTBT, now signed by over 140 countries including all five declared nuclear powers. President Clinton should cancel the subcritical experiments and establish a global standard against conducting nuclear weapons activities at nuclear test sites. Furthermore, the

United States could demonstrate its commitment to upholding this emerging CTBT regime by seeking agreement with Russia and China to permanently close the world's remaining nuclear test sites - Nevada Test Site, Novaya Zemlya, and Lop Nor. France has closed its nuclear test sites in the South Pacific. The United Kingdom utilized the Nevada Test Site."

Congresspersons Cynthia McKinney and Ronald Dellums were joined by 42 other House Representatives in this letter sent to President Clinton on June 20, 1997:

Dear President Clinton:

We are extremely concerned that the Department of Energy (DOE) again plans to conduct underground subcritical nuclear weapons experiments at the Nevada Test Site. These experiments could severely damage global entry-into-force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) which you worked so hard to achieve.

The DOE states that the proposed experiments are necessary to maintain a reliable nuclear stockpile. However, there is no evidence to date to suggest that potential problems such as plutonium aging have degraded the performance of the weapons designs in the active U.S. arsenal. Indeed, a 1997 JASON review states that "there is no claim that the data from these experiments are needed immediately as part of the Science Based Stockpile Stewardship and Management Program in order to retain confidence in the reliability and performance of the U.S. stockpile..."

The DOE has never conducted an independent technical review of the utility of the subcritical experiments, their timing or location, or their cost effectiveness; neither has it or other agencies conducted a formal evaluation of the nuclear arms control and non-proliferation impacts of conducting such activities. At a minimum, therefore, we believe that these experiments should not be conducted at this time.

The fact that these subcritical experiments would be conducted 900 feet underground — a depth sufficient to contain nuclear explosions with large yields — sets a precedent for conducting underground nuclear tests that a test ban treaty violator would find useful. Because the CTBT is not yet ratified, there are no existing verification standards nor methods by which to determine whether a nuclear weapons experiment violates the CTBT or not. The U.S. is unwisely creating a testing norm under which other nations could justify conducting similar underground nuclear weapons experiments at their test sites. An even more dangerous consequence is that countries with nuclear capability, but lacking the sophisticated testing technology of the declared nuclear weapons states, could be provoked to resume full-scale underground testing.

Mr. President, your admirable promotion of non-proliferation and your vision of a nuclear weapon-free 21st century is put at risk by a U.S. commitment to subcritical nuclear experiments.

We urge you to cancel these subcritical experiments. By establishing a prohibition on nuclear testing of any kind under the CTBT, the United States could set a global standard that would serve to promote treaty ratification, rather than undermine it, thereby building global security.

Sincerely,

Rep. Cynthia McKinney
Rep. Ronald Dellums