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Nuclear sites get armed police

BY ANGELA JAMESON AND JAMES BONE

600-strong force to guard against terror

A NEW independent police force is to be created by the Government to protect Britain's nuclear sites from terrorist attack.

Ministers are also worried about attempts by fanatical groups to steal nuclear waste to create a "dirty bomb".

Al-Qaeda has boasted of its wish to detonate a crude device in a Western city, and intelligence agencies found detailed diagrams of US nuclear installations at terrorist hideouts in Afghanistan. They feared the sites would be subject to airborne suicide attack.



The proposed Civil Nuclear Constabulary would protect seven atomic sites and guard nuclear materials when they are transported around the country. Many of its 600 members would be armed.

The increased threat to Britain's nuclear installations from terrorist attacks was recognised by the Government after the security services carried out an investigation after September 11 and identified nuclear sites as poorly defended.

This inquiry also gave warning of the risk of a terrorist group trying to hijack shipments of nuclear waste and suggested that a specialist police force be created to protect these cargoes as they are moved around the country.

Plans for the new police force were disclosed as security forces in Britain and the US staged an unprecedented operation for the American Independence Day celebrations yesterday amid fears that al-Qaeda would try to avenge its defeat in Afghanistan by attacking a major target.

Throughout the day US warplanes patrolled the skies above the country's nuclear sites and many of its main cities. National Guard troops took up positions inside nuclear power plants and Coast Guard vessels intercepted boats after an FBI alert that scuba divers might try to sabotage water-cooling systems.

The proposed details for Britain's Civil Nuclear Constabulary were included in the small print of the Government's White Paper on cleaning up nuclear waste, which will cost £48 billion. Ministers are considering creating a "home guard" of civilians trained to support the nuclear police in exceptional circumstances. These "civilian support officers" would undertake searches of people and vehicles in or just outside the critical nuclear sites. "The purpose would be to free police manpower for more demanding tasks," the White Paper says.

The Nuclear Constabulary would operate in the same way as other specialist forces such as the British Transport Police and the Ministry of Defence Police, and would have its own chief constable and its own police authority, appointed by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

The backbone of the force would be the UK Atomic Energy Authority Constabulary (UKAEAC), which was established in 1954 to protect nuclear material on specified sites.

David Blunkett, the Home Secretary, increased the powers of the UKAEAC in emergency anti-terrorist legislation in December last year, allowing it to mount patrols and stop-and-search operations up to three miles from nuclear bases. It was also authorised to make arrests at other civil sites including sea ports, airports and railway stations to prevent terrorists seizing nuclear materials in transit.

Now Patricia Hewitt, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, wants to create a specialist force independent of the nuclear industry.

Nuclear authorities accept that they need a specialist armed unit familiar with the environment inside nuclear sites and able to provide an immediate response.

Senior government sources yesterday refused to disclose how quickly the new force could be formed, but said that the Director of Civil Nuclear Security, the Government's chief security regulator for the nuclear industry, was urgently trying to strengthen current security arrangements.

Officers in the new force would be banned from joining a trade union and would not be allowed to strike or withhold their labour. Funding for the force would rest ultimately with British Nuclear Fuels and the UK Atomic Energy Authority, the operators for Britain's civil nuclear sites. The two organisations are publicly owned and effectively subsidised by taxpayers, although British Nuclear Fuels is technically insolvent because its liabilities exceed its assets.

The public would have the chance to question the new constabulary at least once a year, under a proposal for the Police Authority to hold an occasional open meeting.

Last night the Association of Chief Police Officers said that it had not been consulted about the powers of the proposed force. A spokesman said: "We will have to study the proposals very closely. But the tendency is for greater collaboration and co-ordination rather than to set up separate new forces."

A comprehensive security review is still under way in the civil nuclear industry, which has sites spread across the UK, including installations at Sellafield in Cumbria, Dounreay in Caithness, Chapelcross in Dumfriesshire, Harwell in Oxfordshire and Capenhurst in Cheshire.

Immediately after the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, extra security measures were introduced at all civilian nuclear sites in Britain and the RAF reviewed its readiness to protect the sites.

The French military installed missile batteries around nuclear installations after September 11. The missiles have since been withdrawn, but a radar antenna remains in place at the La Hague reprocessing plant to detect any airborne terrorist threats.

There is still a three-kilometre no-fly zone over that and other French nuclear plants and severe restrictions on use of the air space within a 30 km radius of the sites. So far the French Government has not created a dedicated nuclear force.

Activists say that even a small plane could cripple a plant or cause a radiation release by targeting the control room or cooling ponds rather than the reactor dome itself.