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U.S.-RUSSIA NUCLEAR AGREEMENT DOES NOT ELIMINATE WARHEADS OR PROVIDE FOR EFFECTIVE PLUTONIUM DISPOSAL

Washington---A draft U.S.-Russian agreement to reduce strategic nuclear weapons would not require the destruction of warheads taken out of service. This would permit both nations to retain thousands of bombs in long-term storage and perhaps return them to active service.

We welcome a commitment by the United States and Russia to reduce their nuclear arsenals, and strongly encourage further reductions to the lowest possible level, said Steven Dolley, research director at Nuclear Control Institute, a Washington, DC-based nonproliferation research and advocacy center. However, the warheads removed from service under the agreement should be permanently dismantled, and their plutonium and uranium explosive cores safely disposed of. Otherwise, both nations could quickly resume a large-scale arms race if the political climate changes.

Moreover, the Bush Administration continues to cave in to Russias insistence that plutonium from dismantled warheads be recycled as mixed-oxide (MOX) fuel for commercial nuclear power plants. The Energy Departments own studies document that the MOX approach is far more expensive and dangerous than directly disposing of plutonium by immobilizing it as waste, noted Dr. Edwin Lyman, NCI scientific director. The Bush Administration reportedly pressured President Putin to accept U.S. terms in the draft nuclear arms agreement, but has never been willing to resist Russias ambitions to pursue a MOX-only plutonium disposal strategy. Russia cannot afford to pursue any plutonium disposition strategy on its own. If the U.S. Government made it a priority, an immobilization approach could be up and running in a relatively short period of time.

DOEs most recent study of plutonium disposition options (available at <http://www.nci.org/pdf/doe-pu-2152002.pdf>) concluded in February that immobilizing all 34 tons of surplus U.S. weapons plutonium would be both cheaper and faster than MOX-fuel approaches. However, the all-immobilization option was rejected because of Russian objections. The Bush Administration has not made the slightest attempt to win Russia over to immobilization, Dolley noted. They appear to be more interested in accommodating their nuclear industry supporters than in implementing effective plutonium disposition and arms control.

More information about the risks of the MOX approach to plutonium disposition is available on NCIs website at <http://www.nci.org>