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Pollux: Subcritical Underground US Nuclear Explosion Test

By Andrew Kishner
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nuclearcrimes.org

On December 6, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) posted on their website that a day earlier it had conducted 'Pollux,' the U.S.'s 27th subcritical nuclear experiment since signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Pollux was a first-of-its-kind subcritical test involving a scale model nuclear warhead primary (this fact wasn't mentioned in their press release, see Annex below).

The CTBT allows these underground explosive experiments on plutonium as long as they don't sustain a chain reaction, however the U.S. has not allowed international inspectors access to its test site since the late 1990s, so the veracity of its claims – that it didn't conduct a very small nuclear explosion – cannot be established. Since the formation of the CTBT, subcritical experiments have been under attack because of their proliferation risks.

Andrew Kishner, founder of NuclearCrimes.org, said 'Any nuclear experiment that's conceivably helpful for advancing nuclear weapons designs and, worse, conducted in an underground area of a nuclear test site, is a recipe for global destabilization.' In 1997, Indonesia's Foreign Minister Ali Alatas remarked at a United Nations meeting "Unless the nuclear powers desisted from sub-critical tests and computer simulations to design new weapons, there could be a resumption of the nuclear arms race and a revival risk of global disaster."

The NNSA is a semi-autonomous agency of the U.S. Department of Energy, which, through 1992, conducted hundreds of nuclear tests at the former Nevada Test Site. That site, a 'proving grounds' for nuclear weapons testing, was renamed in recent years to the Nevada National Security Site, which maintains a 'readiness' for treaty breakout and resumption of nuclear testing.

Andrew Kishner said 'As an American, the thing that angers me about subcritical tests is that the DOE is an un-rehabilitated nuclear criminal. They're back at the scene of the crime. Their test site is still open for blowing up nuclear bombs. Today, those bombs entail subcritical explosions. But I fear the DOE has on its wish list to do critical ones, and won't care again who is living downwind.'

NNSA press release: http://nnsa.energy.gov/mediaroom/pressreleases/pollux120612

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ANNEX

Press Release

NNSA Conducts Pollux Subcritical Experiment at Nevada National Security Site
Dec 6, 2012

LAS VEGAS – The National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) today announced that Pollux, a subcritical experiment, was successfully conducted yesterday at its Nevada National Security Site (NNSS).

The experiment, conducted by staff from NNSS, Los Alamos National Laboratory and Sandia National Laboratories, gathered scientific data that will provide crucial information to maintain the safety and effectiveness of the nation's nuclear weapons.

"Challenging subcritical experiments maintain our capabilities to ensure that we can support a safe, secure and effective stockpile without having to conduct underground testing," said NNSA Administrator Thomas D'Agostino. "I applaud the work done by the men and women who worked to make this experiment successful. Experiments such as this help deliver President Obama's nuclear security agenda."

Pollux was the 27th subcritical experiment to date. The previous subcritical experiment, Barolo B, was conducted on Feb. 2, 2011. Pollux employed a superb new diagnostic that recently won an R&D 100 award.

"Diagnostic equipment fielded by our scientists resulted in more data collected in this single experiment than all other previous subcritical experiments," said NNSA Deputy Administrator for Defense Programs Don Cook. "This type of data is critical for ensuring our computer simulations can accurately predict performance, and thus continued confidence in the safety and effectiveness of the nation's stockpile."

Christopher Deeney, NNSA Assistant Deputy Administrator for Stockpile Stewardship said, "Pollux will provide a significant data set to verify codes important to laboratories' stockpile missions."

Subcritical experiments examine the behavior of plutonium as it is strongly shocked by forces produced by chemical high explosives. Subcritical experiments produce essential scientific data and technical information used to help maintain the safety and effectiveness of the nuclear weapons stockpile. The experiments are subcritical; that is, no critical mass is formed and no self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction can occur; thus, there is no nuclear explosion.

Watch a video of the experiment on YouTube.

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Established by Congress in 2000, NNSA is a semi-autonomous agency within the U.S. Department of Energy responsible for enhancing national security through the military application of nuclear science. NNSA maintains and enhances the safety, security, reliability and performance of the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile without nuclear testing; works to

reduce global danger from weapons of mass destruction; provides the U.S. Navy with safe and effective nuclear propulsion; and responds to nuclear and radiological emergencies in the U.S. and abroad.

Andrew Kishner *is founder of NuclearCrimes.org, which provides analysis into the history and public health consequences of nuclear weapons work during the 20th century by several 'nuclear club' nations.*

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