

Unreported by the Media: America's Nuclear Weapons Tests. The Truth is a "Bitter Pill"

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On December 13, North Korea's state-run news agency issued a two-sentence statement via radio, joining critics in Iran and Japanese hibakusha and anti-nuclear activists who have condemned the U.S.'s December 5th subcritical nuclear experiment named 'Pollux.'

The critical part of the North Korean statement, as translated by a BBC news monitoring service, reads: 'Despite strong objection and denunciation from the world community, the United States is continuously and frantically clinging onto carrying out nuclear tests for developing new nuclear weapons.'

There are elements of truth and mistruth in North Korea's statement. Let's start with the mistruths. Contrary to misleading statements made in blogs and by some in the international media, the recent subcritical experiment was not a nuclear test. Nor did it lead to any leaked radiation. These tests occur in a fortified containment in an underground tunnel that prevents the possibility of an accidental release (although one similar test, decades ago, did cause a fire).

The U.S. Department of Energy argues that because it can't conduct a real nuclear test to ensure that aging components and weapons-grade plutonium inside U.S. nuclear warheads are still reliable, it therefore has to resort to subcritical tests and other so-called 'stockpile stewardship' experiments.

As long as these laboratory tests on plutonium (and warhead weapons parts) don't induce a runaway chain reaction, the U.S. is allowed by the CTBT to do these things. A runaway chain reaction, by the way, is the modern definition of a nuclear explosion, but modern doesn't mean good. In fact, the current definition of 'nuclear explosion' is a very bad one. Why? Well, no one opposing nuclear weapons has ever said they oppose them on the grounds that they're designed to induce a domino effect on the fissioning of plutonium. People complain about nukes because of the size of the energy release these weapons of mass (or worldwide) destruction are designed to discharge - as heat, blast and radiation. It would make more sense to ban all man-made nuclear energy releases.

Critics of the U.S. program allege that the hundreds and hundreds of stockpile stewardship experiments conducted since the U.S. signed the CTBT and the fact that most of them are duplicate experiments of precursor ones suggest that the program is not, or not any longer, credible. The thought is that the program is either a big boondoggle or the Department of Energy is secretly designing new nuclear weapons.

But you don't have to agree with the critics. Take it from the horse's mouth. Have you heard

of the declassified document known as the DOE "Green Book?" Obtained in 1997 through the Freedom of Information Act, the Green Book indicated that the DOE's stockpile stewardship program - of which subcritical tests are a part - is not really about stewardship at all, but about new nuclear options. The Green Book states "In the meantime, future national policies are supported for deterrence by retaining the ability to develop new nuclear options for emergent threats." The DOE would argue that it isn't currently designing and testing next-generation nuclear weapons via simulations, however the lack of transparency of its stockpile stewardship program (the last time the U.S. allowed international inspectors access to an underground subcritical test was in the late 1990s) speaks louder than its words.

And sometimes the curious omission of words creates the most suspicion. Take for example the omission by the DOE about its December 5th test 'Pollux.' A May 2012 report titled 'Supplement to Department of Energy Activities Relating to the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board, Fiscal Year 2011 Site-Specific Activities' described Pollux as a 'scaled subcritical experiment with special nuclear material. The experimental campaign is a first-of-a-kind demonstration...' Yet neither that report nor any subsequent one (and not even the DOE's Pollux press release) elaborated on these 'scaled subcritical experiments.' The government never gave us a definition of them. Why not? Has the Department of Energy been keeping something from the public?

So, what really are 'scaled subcritical experiments?'

Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists wrote in his September 2011 article titled 'Hydrodynamic Tests: Not to Scale' that scaled experiments are 'experiments in an implosion geometry that is essentially identical to an actual warhead design, but reduced in size.'

These are scaled down versions of the real thing. Kristensen mentioned in his article that Pollux may be the first of several 'scaled' tests that would be roughly half scale models too...of a nuclear warhead! So, Pollux was a subcritical nuclear test on plutonium-239 weapons grade fuel INSIDE a half-scale model of a nuclear bomb!

The U.S. has carried out a first-ever subcritical nuclear test in a shrunken nuclear fission bomb!?

And if the Department of Energy doesn't really have a need for its stockpile stewardship tests, then what was the purpose of this provocative experiment? Was it a boondoggle? Or is the U.S. simply, as North Korea suggests, 'frantically clinging onto carrying out nuclear tests?' I'd hate to agree with North Korea, but it sure looks like the folks in the Energy Department are simply not able to control their lust for conducting a nuclear test. In my opinion, they never have been able to control that lust. That lust is the reason why the U.S. won't ratify the CTBT and why the U.S. is one of only two or three countries left which still has a nuclear test site that it hasn't yet shut down. That lust was also the reason why it and its predecessor - the Atomic Energy Commission - lied to the American people about the fallout from nuclear weapons testing. They said the radioactive debris falling on Americans' homes was safe ('There is no danger') because they simply didn't want citizens to force a halt to their precious weapons development program.

It all makes perfect sense when you accept this truth. Think about it. Why else are they blowing up shrunken nuclear bombs at a nuclear test site?

Andrew Kushner is founder of NuclearCrimes.org, which provides analysis into contemporary environmental radiation dangers and also the history and public health consequences of nuclear weapons work during the 20th century by several 'nuclear club' nations.

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