

Army Seeks Small Nuclear Warhead

Washington

The Pentagon is moving toward development of a miniature nuclear warhead for U.S. Pershing missiles based in Europe that would sharply reduce the amount of atomic explosives they now carry.

The U.S. has thousands of so-called "tactical" or "battlefield support" nuclear weapons based in Europe. But many of these are actually several times more powerful than the 20-kiloton atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. A single kiloton is equal in explosive power to 1000 tons of TNT.

The 250 to 400 Pershing missiles the Army has in Europe since the late 1960s, for example, are armed with warheads ranging from 60 kilotons to 400 kilotons, with most of the missiles carrying the larger-sized warheads.

The new so-called Pershing II warhead expected to be developed would cut that down to about one kiloton and add an extremely accurate new guidance system which the military hopes will allow the weapon to retain its military usefulness while reducing danger to surrounding areas.

There are two reasons for the desire to develop smaller warheads.

First, smaller and more accurate atomic weapons, it is reasoned, could carry the first signal of "escalation" to the Soviet Union in the hope of halting an already started war in Europe, without creating nuclear havoc in Europe by use of larger weapons.

Second, proponents claim that if a so-called "tactical nuclear war" is fought, such weapons would still be effective against military targets and at least hold out the possibility of less damage to civilian areas.

Defense department officials stress that there has been no decision made actually to produce these new warheads at this point, and that considerable development and testing lies ahead.

However, a top level Pentagon review panel met on Tuesday and officials say they expect that group to recommend to Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger that a replacement warhead and new guidance system for Pershing be moved into the advanced development stage so that it could eventually be produced if needed.

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