Nuclear Proliferation Prevention Project (NPPP)

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New Study: IAEA Cannot Safeguard Nuclear Facilities against Theft, Diversion of Bomb-Grade Material

NPPP Urges Hague Summit to Halt Spread of Uranium Enrichment, Plutonium Reprocessing

AUSTIN – More than four decades after the creation of its "safeguards," the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) still cannot confidently detect the removal from fuel facilities of many bombs' worth of fissionable material in time to prevent the manufacture of one or more nuclear weapons.

That is the key finding of a new study – "Can the IAEA Safeguard Fuel-Cycle Facilities?" – released today by the Nuclear Proliferation Prevention Project (NPPP), at the University of Texas at Austin, co-authored by the NPPP's coordinator, Alan J. Kuperman, David Sokolow, and Edwin S. Lyman, Senior Scientist in the Global Security Program of the Union of Concerned Scientists.

IAEA safeguards "currently cannot come close to achieving their explicit goal of providing timely warning of a suspected diversion of one bomb's worth of fissile material," the study finds. "Prospects are even worse in states that resist cooperation and may wish to keep open their weapons option, such as Iran," the report warns.

As world leaders gather in The Hague next week to discuss nuclear security – the biggest summit ever in the Netherlands – Kuperman urged action: "If the Nuclear Security Summit is to justify its name and all the resources poured into it, participating countries should agree to freeze expansion of spent-fuel recycling, to avoid creating more reprocessing and MOX fuel facilities that cannot be adequately safeguarded against nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism."

The study observes that "theoretical solutions to improve IAEA safeguards have been discussed for decades," but says they have not been implemented for three reasons: nuclear industry opposition to intrusive inspections, national concerns about sovereignty, and cost.

NPPP's analysis documents specific, alarming failures of international and domestic nuclear material control and accounting in Japan, France, the UK, and Iran. It also compiles data on all of the world's large-scale civilian nuclear fuel-cycle facilities.

The report concludes: "If the prospect of an undetected diversion or theft of fissile material is unacceptable to the international community, then it is imprudent to permit the construction of additional nuclear fuel-cycle facilities, or expansion of existing ones, especially in states of proliferation concern, unless and until safeguards can be substantially upgraded to meet their explicit detection goals."

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