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A Pakistani view of U.S. nuclear weapons

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Publication date: Wednesday 6 February 2008

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"The [U.S.] Air Force has made substantial changes in its handling of nuclear weapons in the wake of a B-52 flight last August during which the pilots and crew were unaware they were carrying six air-launched cruise missiles with nuclear warheads."

â€”["Air Force Alters Rules for Handling of Nuclear Arms,"](#) *Washington Post* January 25, 2008.

"The Pakistani government would be willing to offer technical advice and assistance to the United States on improving its nuclear weapons handling procedures."

â€”*Pakistani Brig. Gen. Atta M. Iqhman*, January 25, 2008.

ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN, JANUARY 25 â€” At a press conference in Islamabad today, Pakistani Brig. Gen. Atta M. Iqhman expressed concern about U.S. procedures for handling nuclear weapons. Iqhman, who oversees the safety and security of the Pakistani nuclear force, said that U.S. protocols for storing and handling nuclear weapons are inadequate. "In Pakistan, we store nuclear warheads separately from their delivery systems, and a nuclear warhead can only be activated if three separate officers agree," Iqhman said. "In the United States, almost 20 years after the end of the Cold War, nuclear weapons still sit atop missiles, on hair-trigger alert, and it only takes two launch-control officers to activate a nuclear weapon. The U.S. government has persistently ignored arms control experts around the world who have said they should at least de-alert their weapons."

Iqhman also questioned the adequacy of U.S. procedures for handling nuclear weapons. He expressed particular concern about the August 29, 2007, incident in which six nuclear weapons were accidentally loaded under the wing of a B-52 by workers who did not observe routine inspection procedures and thought they were attaching conventional weapons to the B-52. The flight navigator should have caught their mistake, but he neglected to inspect the weapons as required. For several hours the nuclear weapons were in the air without anyone's knowledge. "The United States needs to develop new protocols for storing and loading nuclear weapons, and it needs to do a better job of recruiting and training the personnel who handle them," Iqhman said.

Iqhman added the Pakistani government would be willing to offer technical advice and assistance to the United States on improving its nuclear weapons handling procedures.

Speaking anonymously because of the issue's sensitivity, senior Pentagon officials said it is Washington's role to give, not receive, advice on nuclear weapons safety and surety issues.

Iqhman pointed out that the August 29 event was not an isolated incident; there have been at least 24 accidents involving nuclear weapons on U.S. planes. He mentioned a 1966 incident in which four nuclear weapons fell to the ground when two planes collided over Spain, as well as a 1968 fire that caused a plane to crash in Greenland with four hydrogen bombs aboard. In 1980, a Titan II missile in Arkansas exploded during maintenance, sending a nuclear warhead flying 600 feet through the air. In a remark that visibly annoyed a U.S. official present at the briefing, Iqhman described the U.S. nuclear arsenal as "an accident waiting to happen."

Jay Keuse of MSNBC News asked Iqhman if Pakistan was in any position to be lecturing other countries given Pakistani scientist A. Q. Khan's record of selling nuclear technology to other countries. "All nuclear weapons states profess to oppose proliferation while helping select allies acquire nuclear weapons technology," Iqhman replied. "The United States helped Britain and France obtain the bomb; France helped the Israelis; and Russia helped China. And China," he added coyly, "is said by Western media sources to have helped Pakistan. So why can't Pakistan behave like everyone else?"

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Iqbal's deputy, Col. Bom Zhalot also expressed concern about the temperament of the U.S. public, asking whether they had the maturity and self-restraint to be trusted with the ultimate weapon. "Their leaders lecture us on the sanctity of life, and their president believes that every embryo is sacred, but they are the only country to have used these terrible weaponsâ€”not just once, but twice. Paul Tibbets, the pilot of the plane that bombed Hiroshima, said he never lost a night's sleep over killing 100,000 people, many of them women and children. That's scarcely human."

While Iqbal glared reproachfully at Zhalot for this rhetorical outburst, Zhalot continued: "We also worry that the U.S. commander-in-chief has confessed to having been an alcoholic. Here in Pakistan, alcohol is 'haram,' so this isn't a problem for us. Studies have also found that one-fifth of U.S. military personnel are heavy drinkers. How many of those have responsibility for nuclear weapons?"

John G. Libb of the Washington Times asked if Americans were wrong to be concerned about Pakistan's nuclear stockpile given the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan. Colonel Zhalot replied: "Millions of Americans believe that these are the last days and that they will be raptured to heaven at the end of the world. You have a president who describes Jesus as his favorite philosopher, and one of the last remaining candidates in your presidential primaries is a preacher who doesn't believe in evolution. Many Pakistanis worry that the United States is being taken over by religious extremists who believe that a nuclear holocaust will just put the true believers on a fast track to heaven. We worry about a nutcase U.S. president destroying the world to save it."

U.S. diplomats in Pakistan declined comment.

[The Bulletin Online, 5 February 2008](#)