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INTERNATIONAL NUCLEAR TRAFFICKING:
LANL TO PROCESS BRITISH POWDERED PLUTONIUM,
TRANSPORT IT TO BELGIUM AND BACK TO NORTH CAROLINA

A consortium of international nuclear corporations, with the approval of the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), have formed an elaborate scheme which involves the transport of dangerous powdered plutonium oxide from Great Britain to the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) in northern New Mexico. The lab will process and polish an unknown quantity of British weapons-grade plutonium (Ó94% Pu^{239}) in order to produce up to 250 pounds of finished product. LANL will then ship this material back across the Atlantic to Dessel, Belgium, for fuel fabrication. Finally, the finished fuel will be shipped from Belgium to the McGuire nuclear power plant in North Carolina, all to pave the way for "burning" plutonium fuel in U.S. commercial reactors. This consortium, known as "DCS," is comprised of Duke Power (an energy corporation based in North Carolina; currently unlicensed for plutonium fuel); the notorious international polluter COGEMA, Inc. (more than 85% own by the French government); and Stone & Webster (an engineering and construction company specializing in nuclear reactors). DOE agreed to process the British plutonium at LANL in October 2001. An initial batch was likely processed this last March.

Powdered plutonium oxide is a very dangerous form of plutonium in the event of an accident because it is potentially respirable. It is generally accepted that a few tens of micrograms of plutonium in a lung results in a very high probability of cancer. Moreover, these international shipments have not been subject to public review, while at the same time there is an express desire by the consortium to avoid the "Canadian experience" (in which LANL shipped test plutonium reactor fuel to Canada and ignited a public relations furor in Michigan over transportation concerns).

As background, the United States has declared 34 metric tonnes of plutonium to be excess. The final disposition of both Russian and American weapons-grade plutonium remains a vexing

proliferation problem. Formerly the U.S. was following a two-track path, one of which was to "burn" plutonium as mixed-oxide fuel (MOX) in commercial reactors. The other track was to immobilize the plutonium in glass logs and dispose of it directly as waste. This had much promise as the safer, cheaper and more proliferation-resistant method. However, in its FY03 budget DOE chose to zero out funding for immobilization. The Department is now promoting the MOX track as the sole path forward, an avenue that will dramatically increase international plutonium transportation (with subsequent potential for accidents and illicit diversion) and introduce plutonium as a commodity into global commerce. This is, at best, a questionable strategy, especially in the post-9/11 world.

LANL currently has the U.S.'s only industrial plutonium fabrication capabilities, hence the shipments to the lab from the U.K. However, what is astonishing is the fact that the plutonium has to be procured from the U.K. to begin with. In documents obtained through FOIA by the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League (BREDL) and provided to Nuclear Watch of New Mexico (NWNM), a DCS official states that DOE acknowledges a "lack of adequate material from the 34 tonnes declared excess" suitable for test MOX fuel fabrication. This has particular significance for the state of South Carolina, to which DOE is preparing to ship most of its excess plutonium. The governor has sued DOE in order to block shipments until there is a binding legal agreement for a plutonium "exit strategy" from his state (he has even threatened to physically block DOE trucks himself). The MOX program is now DOE's only exit strategy. Yet out of 34 tonnes the Department apparently cannot find suitable material for test MOX fuel fabrication without preparatory extensive and waste-producing plutonium reprocessing.

Jay Coghlan, NWNM Director, commented, "It's incredible that DOE has rejected immobilization, the cheapest, safest, most proliferation-resistant plutonium disposition method, in favor of an endless cycle of international shipments and the introduction of weapons-grade plutonium into global commerce." BREDL spokesman Lou Zeller said, “Today’s revelations show that the DOE has not been straightforward with the people of the United States or the world about the transportation of plutonium. Shipping enough plutonium for 50 nuclear bombs on the high seas is an invitation to disaster.”

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Background documents and BREDL's report are available upon request.