The Japan Times

ARRANGEMENT 'SKIRTS INTERNATIONAL LAW'

U.S. plans to 'outsource' nuclear strikes

WASHINGTON (AFP-Jiji) In case of a major conflict in Europe, U.S. nuclear strategy calls for "outsourcing" nuclear strikes to NATO allies that don't have such weapons in what experts see as an attempt to skirt international law, according to an authoritative report made public Wednesday.

The study by the Natural Resources Defense Council, a national security and environmental think tank based in Washington, is based mainly on declassified official documents and provides a detailed analysis of the U.S. nuclear arsenal in Europe as well as of doctrines justifying its presence there more than a decade after the end of the Cold War.

It argues that preparations for delivering the 180 nuclear bombs are taking place in peacetime, and "equipping nonnuclear countries with the means to conduct nuclear warfare is inconsistent with today's international efforts to dissuade other countries from obtaining nuclear weapons."

"If China deployed nuclear bombs in North Korea, equipped North Korean aircraft with mechanical and electronic devices to deliver the weapons, and trained North Korean pilots to draw up nuclear strike plans, there would be hell to pay, and rightly so," said Hans Kristensen, the author of the report. "Yet that is precisely what the United States is doing in Europe."

The arrangement, the council insists, "skirts international law" because the Nonproliferation Treaty prohibits a nuclear state from transferring nuclear weapons to a nonwea-

pon state, and prohibits a nonnuclear state from receiving such weapons.

The research organization dismisses the argument that if war broke out, the Nonproliferation Treaty would no longer apply.

For the first time, the document reveals a specific number of nuclear warheads that under current U.S. and NATO war plans would be transferred to U.S. nonnuclear allies to be delivered to targets by their warplanes.

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Europe, as many as 180 nuclear bombs would be earmarked for delivery by the air forces of Belgium, the Netherlands, Turkey, Germany and Italy, the report said.

The weapons are part of a 480-warhead nuclear arsenal the United States kept in Europe in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the withdrawal of Soviet nuclear forces from the continent.

The arsenal, according to the study, is being kept at eight air force bases in six European countries: Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

Plans call for the remaining 300 weapons to stay in U.S. hands and to be delivered by F-15 and F-16 fighter jets based in Europe, the report says

The Defense Department declined to comment on the report, citing its long-standing policy of not publicly discussing deployments of nuclear weapons.

The report also sheds light on a secret 1994 U.S. Air Force document that lists 15 nuclear bombing ranges scattered all over Europe, including one in Suppes, France, despite the fact that France is not part of NATO's nuclear command structure.

Moreover, it lists one such training range in the North African nation of Tunisia that is not a member of Western military alliance at all.

"It is unclear whether Tunisia knows that Ben Ghilouf is for nuclear training," the study said.

According to the report, the start of President George W. Bush's first term in office was marked by a quiet withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Greece, a full-fledged NATO ally.

In April 2001, U.S. Air Force headquarters in Europe issued a secret order to move 20 nuclear bombs out of Araxos Air Base in Greece to an unknown destination.

The decision may have been prompted by a refusal by the Greek government to modernize its fleet of warplanes earmarked for carrying these weapons, the document suggested.

"Greece's decision is also important because it represents the first case where nuclear weapons have been completely removed from a burden-sharing NATO country," the report said.