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RAF Lakenheath: US nuclear weapons are returning to Britain

The British government continues to ignore public concerns over the return of United States nuclear weapons to Britain, despite growing evidence that they are on their way. CND opposes any return of these weapons to RAF Lakenheath in Suffolk. The deployment of these bombs in Britain makes us a target in any potential nuclear conflict involving the US and must be stopped.

Weapons return

Evidence is mounting that the US is preparing to site some of its nuclear weapons in the UK, specifically at RAF Lakenheath in Suffolk. This originated when the US Department of Defense added the UK to a list of NATO nuclear weapons storage locations in Europe being upgraded under a multimillion-dollar infrastructure programme.¹

Fresh budget documents dated March 2023 back up the suspicion that Washington is in the process of re-establishing its nuclear weapons presence in Britain. Published as part of the US Air Force (USAF) 2024 budgetary justification package, the papers outline the need for a 'surety dormitory'.² Surety is a term used by US government departments to refer to the capability to keep nuclear weapons secure.

The 144-bunk dormitory, the documents say, is needed, as with "the influx of airmen due to the arrival of the potential Surety mission and the bed down of the two F-35 squadrons there is a significant deficiency in the amount of unaccompanied housing available for E4s and below at Royal Air Force Lakenheath". Construction is expected to go on until February 2026.

Further documents on the US Department of Defence's procurement database reveal plans for a 'nuclear mission' at RAF Lakenheath, with the Pentagon ordering new equipment for the base.³ And Washington also intends to double the amount of nuclear-capable F-35 aircraft it has stationed at Lakenheath to 54 – the first phase of upgrade works for this purpose has been completed.

History repeats itself

RAF Lakenheath previously hosted US nuclear weapons for more than five decades, first arriving in September 1954. CND arranged

protests at the base alongside the Lakenheath Action Group, including days of action where hundreds of people descended on the base. Direct action activists broke into the base and locked on to the gates of the ammunition depot, preventing access for hours. Messages of support were shared between campaigners at other US bases in Europe, and from Faslane, where Britain's nuclear weapons are stationed. Plays were presented outside the base, and letters handed in to the Commander.

Following years of protesting, the nuclear weapons were eventually removed in 2008, but not before nuclear accidents endangered the local community.

Nuclear accidents

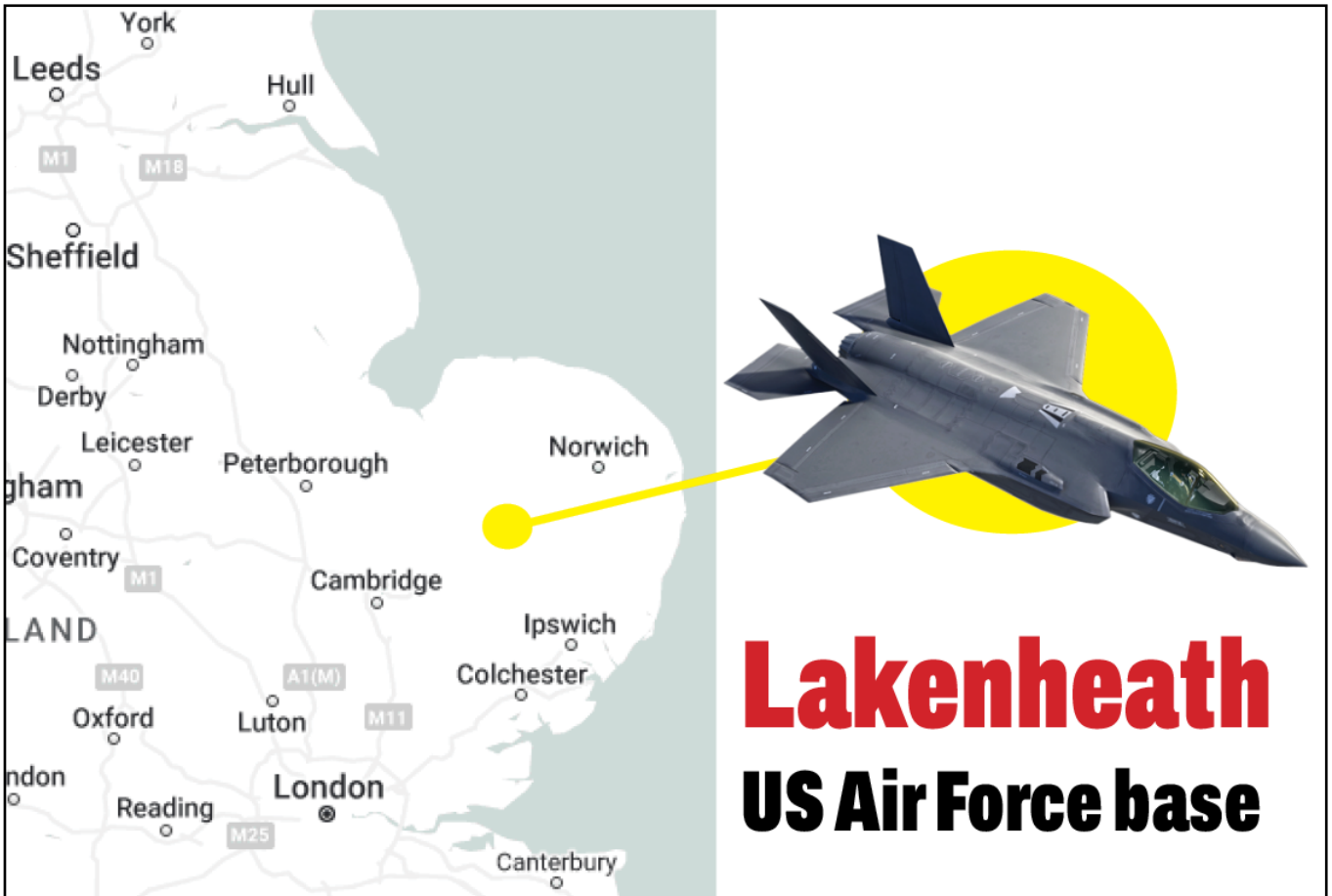
At least two major incidents involving nuclear weapons are known to have occurred at RAF Lakenheath.

In 1956 a B-47 bomber on a routine training mission crashed into a storage unit containing nuclear weapons, killing four servicemen. Official US documents declared it was a 'miracle' that none of the bombs detonated, and that 'it is possible that a part of Eastern England would have become a desert'. Five years later, an aeroplane loaded with a nuclear bomb caught fire following pilot error. The bomb was 'scorched and blistered', and scientists later discovered it could have detonated in slightly different circumstances.

Both incidents were covered up by the US and British governments, only being admitted in 1979 and 2003 respectively.⁴

New 'useable' nuclear bombs increase risk of nuclear use

Despite being called an RAF station, Lakenheath is run by the USAF and currently



only hosts USAF units and personnel, leading many campaigners to describe it as USAF Lakenheath. The host wing is the 48th Fighter Wing (48 FW), also known as the Liberty Wing. With around 6,000 personnel on the base, it is the largest deployment of USAF personnel in Britain.

Lakenheath received the first of its F-35A nuclear-capable fighters in 2021, with a total of 54 F-35As expected to be based there eventually. A new fuel cell maintenance facility, which will enable the US to operate the F-35 aircraft from the Suffolk airbase, opened in 2023. The F-35A aircraft is compatible with the B61 nuclear bomb.

B61 warheads are already deployed by the US at other European bases, and it is believed that an upgraded version – B61-12 – may now be deployed.

The deployment of the more advanced B61-12 increases the risk of nuclear weapons being used in war. When used in conjunction with an F-35 jet fighter, the B61-12 uses an internal navigation system to reach its target – meaning that the bombs can reach much deeper into ‘enemy’ territory.

B61-12s can also be switched from internally-guided mode to gravity bomb mode, which would probably be delivered by stealth bombers. This version can be detonated beneath the Earth’s surface, increasing their destructiveness.

Have the bombs arrived?

On 16 January 2025, Jill Hruby of the US National Nuclear Security Administration stated that “[t]he new B61-12 gravity bombs are fully forward deployed...”⁵ It has not been confirmed whether this means the bombs are now stationed at NATO bases across Western Europe, including RAF Lakenheath.

However, the British government has failed to provide any information about the situation, falling back on its position of ‘nuclear ambiguity’ – where they will neither confirm nor deny the developments.

In a letter to the Prime Minister, CND urged Mr Starmer to make a public statement clarifying the situation, writing:

“It is totally unacceptable that the news of this ‘forward deployment’ has been discovered through posts on X and US department websites. As far as we are aware, there has been no announcement by government to parliament about this crucial information.

There has been no information presented to local communities about the new security risks that they face. US nuclear weapons at Lakenheath will present a major threat, not only to communities near Lakenheath, but to Britain as a whole, by putting us on the US/NATO nuclear front line.

The British population have a right to know what risks they face from such a deployment – and their right to express their opposition to it.”⁶

CND is now legally challenging the stationing of US nuclear weapons in Britain, writing to the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and Suffolk County Council to highlight our concerns. We maintain that the authorities do not have the required plans and measures in place to deal with emergency situations that could arise from the storage of radioactive materials, in breach of statutory obligations under a number of the 2019 Radiation Regulations.

These regulations include a requirement to carry out a hazard evaluation and have plans prepared to limit the possibility of a radiation emergency, as well as a consequence assessment for if one should occur.

Nuclear-sharing

US nuclear weapons based here would make the UK once again a forward nuclear base for the US. Approximately 150 American B61 nuclear gravity bombs are already currently stationed in five countries in Europe: Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and Turkey.

There is strong opposition to these weapons being sited in Europe, including from some of the host nation governments. Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands have all – unsuccessfully – called for the removal of US nuclear weapons from their countries.

The nuclear sharing arrangement between the US and the European bases is part of NATO defence policy. In peace time, the nuclear weapons stored in non-nuclear countries are guarded by US forces, with a dual code system activated in a time of war. Both host country and the US would then need to approve the use of the weapons, which would be launched on the former's aeroplanes.

If the UK is now preparing to host US nuclear weapons, this major increase in NATO's capacity to wage nuclear war in Europe is dangerously destabilising. Their return will increase global tensions and put Britain on the front line in a NATO/Russia war.

Furthermore, we have seen how the US' nuclear-sharing has already had an escalatory impact on global

tensions. Previously, the US was the only country in the world to station nuclear weapons outside its borders. But in 2023, Russia announced it had completed a transfer of nuclear weapons to be stationed in Belarus, with the country's leader Vladimir Putin likening the development to NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangement. The Russian government has also directly addressed the reports of US weapons coming to Britain, declaring it would be viewed as an "escalation".⁷

How would a nuclear attack affect you?

Having US nuclear weapons here in the UK undermines our safety by making a nuclear attack on us more likely. In a nuclear conflict, it is probable that Lakenheath would be targeted, followed by strikes on cities across the country.

If one Russian warhead was dropped on the centre of London, for example, it is believed almost a million people could die. A single nuclear strike on any town or city would be catastrophic for the local community and environment, and the radioactive impact would spread much further. But a nuclear war would be catastrophic for all humanity, forms of life, and the entire planet.

Resist

The return of US nuclear weapons to Britain is a huge challenge for the peace movement, and CND will do everything we can to prevent these weapons being sited here. Millions mobilised across Europe against the imposition of cruise and Pershing missiles in the 1980s. We got rid of all those weapons then, and we must have the energy, the commitment, and the confidence to do that again.

Hundreds of campaigners have already protested at the base in response to recent developments, with plans for many more protests and actions to come.

CND calls on the UK government to refuse to host American nuclear weapons in this country. The US should also withdraw all their other nuclear weapons from Europe. A withdrawal of all US/NATO nuclear weapons from Europe would help reduce tensions at this dangerous time, and would significantly contribute to taking forward nuclear disarmament internationally.

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- 3 'US to station nuclear weapons in UK to counter threat from Russia', The Telegraph, 26 January 2024
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/01/26/us-nuclear-bombs-lackenheath-raf-russia-threat-hiroshima/>
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- 6 'Starmer: come clean on US nukes in Britain', CND website, 23 January 2025 <https://cnduk.org/starmer-come-clean-on-us-nukes-in-britain/>
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