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RAF Lakenheath:

US nuclear weapons are returning to Britain

CND opposes any return of United States nuclear weapons to RAF Lakenheath in Suffolk. 110 nuclear bombs were stored at the airbase until they were removed in 2008 following persistent popular protest, and they must not be allowed back.

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 last from June 2024 to February 2026.

And now, new 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

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

Situation at Lakenheath

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 24 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 October 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 expected that an upgraded version – B61-12 – will be deployed imminently.

The B61-12 is a more advanced warhead than the US ones currently in Europe, and its deployment poses serious questions about the US' nuclear strategy. When used in conjunction with an F-35 jet fighter, the B61-12 uses an internal navigation system to reach its target, enabling this upgraded warhead to be much more accurate than previous versions.

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

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. Before 2023, the US was the only country in the world to station nuclear

weapons outside its borders. But last year, 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'.⁵

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 in 2024.

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.

- ¹ Department of Defense /Military Construction Program / FY 2023 BUDGET / North Atlantic Treaty Organization Security Investment Program / Justification Data Submitted to Congress, Published April 2022 https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2023/budget_justification/pdfs/11_NATO_Security_Investment_Program/FY23_NATO_Security_Investment_Program.pdf
- ² Department of the Air Force /Military Construction Program / Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 Budget Estimates / Justification Data Submitted to Congress, Published March 2023 <https://www.saffm.hq.af.mil/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=8x62jjw60Hg%3D&portalid=84>
- 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-lakenheath-raf-russia-threat-hiroshima/>
- ⁴ 'MoD catalogues its nuclear blunders', *The Guardian*, 13 October 2003 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2003/oct/13/energy.nuclearindustry>
- ⁵ 'Return of US nuclear weapons to UK would be an escalation, says Russia', *The Guardian*, 5 September 2023 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/05/return-of-us-nuclear-weapons-to-uk-would-be-an-escalation-says-russia>

