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No-fly zones over nuclear facilities unlikely

OTTAWA (CP) — Canada is unlikely to impose no-fly zones over its nuclear reactors or station missiles around them, a senior nuclear regulatory official says.

In the event of a credible threat to the reactors, Norad would likely be called on to protect them with jet fighters, said Jim Blythe, manager of security review project at the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission.

There's also an ongoing study of engineering and procedural improvements to make the reactors less vulnerable to attack, Blythe said in an interview Thursday.

Washington imposed no-fly zones over U.S. reactors after Sept. 11 and France installed missile units around some of its nuclear facilities, fuelling speculation about similar measures in Canada.

But the feeling is that it wouldn't be feasible to impose no-fly zones in Canada, said Blythe.

"That you could, say, draw an arc around Pickering of a certain diameter and a certain height and say commercial and private aircraft shall never fly in these zones — from a navigational perspective, that would be exceedingly difficulty."

Enforcement would be equally problematic.

"The Canadian Armed Forces doesn't have the resources, the personnel or materiel to have, say, F-18s in the area on a continuous basis."

It's also hard to justify the use of missiles that automatically shoot down any aircraft violating a defined space, Blythe said.

"That instantaneous, irreversible application of deadly force is not something that, in the absence of dire circumstances, I think . . . is acceptable in this society."

He denied that U.S. measures are tougher, saying the no-fly zones there are temporary and not vigorously enforced. Planes that violate the zones are simply warned or fined, he said.

As for France, anti-aircraft units have not been installed at reactors, only at fuel reprocessing facilities where the potential for radioactive release is much greater, he said. Candu reactors don't require such facilities.

The commission is continuing to work with intelligence agencies, police and Transport Canada to ensure that appropriate measures, such as jet patrols, can be invoked quickly in case of a credible threat.

The study of how to make the facilities less vulnerable to air attack could come down to straightforward measures such as reinforcing protective walls.

Nuclear plant operators have already taken extra security measures against the risk of ground attack, such as stationing armed guards on site.

Canada has 22 nuclear power reactors, a few research reactors, and some 4,000 facilities that use radioactive materials in military or industrial applications.

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