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February 12, 2002

Nuclear plant officials confident about security

By LINDA ASHTON
The Associated Press

RICHLAND, Wash. - The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks have brought a new sense of realism to the high level of training and security at the Columbia Generating Station, the Northwest's only nuclear power plant.

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Security forces have always trained for worst-case scenario disasters and sabotage at the 1,200-megawatt plant, which began generating electricity in 1984.

``Our training hasn't changed since Sept. 11. I guess it just became more realistic," said Bruce Hugo, a control room supervisor.

On Monday, employees of Energy Northwest, the public power consortium that owns the plant, took several members of the media on a security tour. The plant is on leased land at the Hanford nuclear reservation.

``This facility is a fortress," said Rod Webring, vice president of operations. ``It was built as a fortress."

At the direction of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Energy Northwest declined to say just how thick steel-reinforced concrete containment walls are at the plant. The reactor itself is encased in steel.

Two weeks ago, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission notified the country's 103 nuclear power plants that terrorists might be planning an airplane attack on a reactor, although the information had not been authenticated.

Energy Northwest executives had long bragged that the plant could withstand the impact of a commercial jetliner, but after Sept. 11 they were forced to admit they had no proof - such engineering design calculations had never been done because the scenario seemed unthinkable.

An energy design institute is now looking at the numbers.

``We think there's a high likelihood we would survive with minimal damage," Webring said.

In a Nuclear Regulatory Commission review in 1998, Columbia Generating Station won high marks for its highly skilled security force.

Energy Northwest works closely with the Hanford Patrol, the Benton County sheriff's office to coordinate emergency response plans. In the event of a radioactive release, an estimated 31,000 people within 10 miles of the plant would have to be evacuated.

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