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Hundreds protest proposed nuclear weapons complex

Joshua J. McElwee | Apr. 18, 2011

Activists raise a banner outside the official sign identifying the Y-12 nuclear weapons complex at a protest April 16. (NCR photos/Robyn Haas and Joshua McElwee)

OAK RIDGE, Tenn. -- Over 160 activists gathered here April 16 outside the Y-12 National Security Complex, a key nuclear weapons production and maintenance complex, to protest a proposed major new facility at the site.

The gathering came after activists had hosted a two-mile march through the downtown area of this eastern Tennessee town, which is sometimes referred to as the ?Hidden City? because of its veiled history as the location where the uranium used in the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, was enriched.

The planned new hub, known as the Uranium Processing Facility, would replace several buildings at the complex, which is responsible for the maintenance and production of the uranium components of every weapon in the U.S. arsenal.

Hoisting a large sign that read ?A safer world is our right? on sticks of bamboo in front of the official sign identifying the National Nuclear Security Administration complex, the activists hosted a play on a make-shift stage outside the facility. Afterwards they placed peace cranes on the fence surrounding the site and staged a five-minute ?die-in? that saw many fall to the ground to emphasize the destructive effect of a nuclear bomb blast.

The Y-12 complex is one of three nuclear weapons sites where new projects are underway. A manufacturing complex for the nonnuclear parts of the U.S. arsenal is under construction in Kansas City, Mo., and a new plutonium facility at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico is also in the planning stages.

Speaking at the beginning of the event to the crowd, which had come from as far away as Michigan, one of the event?s organizers said that the three planned nuclear weapons facilities, when taken together, would ?reconstitute the U.S. capacity to produce nuclear weapons.?

?The message...is that nuclear weapons will remain the fundamental cornerstone of power in the world for generations to come,? said Ralph Hutchison, coordinator for the Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance.

The peace group, which has been organizing against activities at the nuclear weapons site for 23 years, hosted

the event. Gathered were both those who have been active with the group for many years and newcomers.

Marcus Keyes, who, as a co-director of the Knoxville diocese?s peace and justice office during the 1990s, would help plan events at the nuclear weapons site, said he has continued to take part in the protests to show that ?all life is sacred.?

?Our government is building nuclear weapons which can, as we know, destroy the planet,? said Keyes. ?I believe from my faith perspective that this is certainly an insult to the creator. And an insult to the human community, who, because of nuclear weapons, would be in the way of great harm. It?s harm to all of us, our families, our children, our grandchildren.?

?We must respond to evil with good, rather than to evil with evil,? he said. ?And a nonviolent response is very much a part of our Catholic tradition.?

Among those involved in the protest were a group of several Buddhists who had hosted an eight-day, 130-mile ?peace walk? prior to the event, leaving from Asheville, N.C., and arriving near the site Friday to lead the march through the city the next day.

Towards the end of the event, Hutchison directed the activists to stand before the barbed-wire fence separating them from a line of uniformed military personnel guarding the complex. Asking them to ?feel the strength of the energy? of those gathered, he had them direct their ?dreams of peace? over the facility.

?Now imagine this energy floating forward, spreading out over the bomb plant like a sheet,? said Hutchison. ?Using the creative energy of your dreams, let that remain suspended over the bomb plant. Now let the sheet slowly drop, to drape over the buildings, to penetrate the security system, to enclose the facility with a power greater than bombs.?

Construction on the new Oak Ridge facility passed a key hurdle in March with an official announcement by the Department of Energy that an environmental study on the impact of development at the site had been completed. A final decision to move forward with the plans is expected in May.

According to President Obama?s fiscal year 2012 budget request for the National Nuclear Security Administration, the Uranium Processing Facility is projected to cost between $4.2 and $6.5 billion. In 2004, the Department of Energy estimated the new facility would cost between $600 million and $1.5 billion.

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer.]

Editor's Note: Below is a slideshow of photos from Saturday's gathering, taken by *NCR* staff members Joshua McElwee and Robyn Haas.

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