UK Minister attends Review Conference following UK disclosure of nuclear stockpile

26 May 2010

UK Foreign Office Minister of State Alistair Burt has travelled to New York to attend talks at the Review Conference of the NPT.

The Minister’s arrival follows a significant announcement by the British Government to help enhance confidence and transparency between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons states, by making public the maximum number of nuclear warheads that the UK will hold in its stockpile.

In the announcement to Parliament, Foreign Secretary William Hague stated that the UK’s overall stockpile of nuclear warheads will not exceed 225 warheads, and the UK will retain up to 160 operationally available warheads.

Speaking in the House of Commons Foreign Secretary William Hague said:

“We believe that the time is now right to be more open about the weapons we hold. We judge that this will assist in building a climate of trust between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons states and contribute therefore to future efforts to reduce the number of nuclear weapons worldwide.”

The Foreign Secretary also announced that the Government would re-examine the circumstances under which the UK might consider use of its nuclear weapons as part of the Strategic Defence and Security Review.

Foreign Secretary William Hague said:

“The UK has long been clear that we would only consider using nuclear weapons in self-defence, including the defence of our NATO allies. However we are prepared to look again at our declaratory policy to ensure that it is fully appropriate to the political and security context in 2010 and beyond, and we will begin this work now.”

“The coalition agreement pledged a strong UK role in the NPT Review Conference and I am delighted to be able to make these announcements today, delivering on that pledge and showing our commitment to working towards the long term goal of a world without nuclear weapons.”

Defence Secretary Dr Liam Fox said:

“Openness and transparency are essential if we are to move towards multilateral disarmament. This is an important step forward and a significant contribution from the UK Government to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference.

“We remain committed to the nuclear deterrent and I welcome the opportunity to review the circumstances in which our weapons could be used.”

The UK has previously announced that we hold up to 160 operationally available nuclear warheads. This has not changed. In addition, we are now announcing the total number of warheads which our overall stockpile will not exceed. Previous announcements acknowledged the existence of a margin above the operationally available warheads, but we have not set out its size. These additional warheads are required to allow for routine processing, maintenance and logistic management so as to maintain the number of operationally available warheads at the required level.

The UK’s nuclear declaratory policy remains as set out in the 2006 White Paper. We would only consider using our nuclear weapons in self-defence (including the defence of our NATO allies), and even then only in extreme circumstances. The UK already gives legally-binding assurances that it will not use nuclear weapons to almost 100 countries through Nuclear Weapon Free Zone treaties. As part of the work of the Strategic Defence and Security Review, the UK’s policy will be reviewed in the light of 2010’s political and security circumstances.

Further information

The UK has previously announced that we hold up to 160 operationally available nuclear warheads. This has not changed. In addition, we are now announcing the total number of warheads which our overall stockpile will not exceed. Previous announcements acknowledged the existence of a margin above the operationally available warheads, but we have not set out its size. These additional warheads are required to allow for routine processing, maintenance and logistic management so as to maintain the number of operationally available warheads at the required level.

The UK’s nuclear declaratory policy remains as set out in the 2006 White Paper. We would only consider using our nuclear weapons in self-defence (including the defence of our NATO allies), and even then only in extreme circumstances. The UK already gives legally-binding assurances that it will not use nuclear weapons to almost 100 countries through Nuclear Weapon Free Zone treaties. As part of the work of the Strategic Defence and Security Review, the UK’s policy will be reviewed in the light of 2010’s political and security circumstances.

The US and France
The US and France have previously made similar announcements of their total stockpile numbers. France declared in 2008 that its arsenal will include fewer than 300 nuclear warheads. The US announced on 3 May 2010 that it has 5,113 warheads in its stockpile.

Background on the NPT

Universally known as the NPT, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons entered into force in 1970. With 189 signatories, it has greater support than any other arms control treaty. All states are now party to it apart from India, Israel and Pakistan. The NPT has three equally important pillars: non-proliferation, disarmament and peaceful use of nuclear energy. The main undertakings include:

• The Non-Nuclear Weapon States agreeing to forego acquisition or development of nuclear weapons and to prevent proliferation of nuclear weapons. This includes accepting international verification by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on their nuclear programmes;
• The Nuclear Weapon States (China, France, Russia, UK and US) pursuing negotiations in good faith towards Nuclear disarmament;
• Recognition of the right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. This includes cooperating to the fullest possible extent on the development of peaceful applications of nuclear energy.

The NPT provides for a Review Conference open to all States Parties to be held every five years. The current Review Conference opened in New York on 3 May and is due to close on 28 May.

Please go to www.fco.gov.uk/nuclear2010 for the latest information from the Review Conference.

For further information please contact either the Foreign Office press office or the Ministry of Defence press office.