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Photos from break-in at nuclear facility feature blood, peace slogans

Joshua J. McElwee | Oct. 23, 2012

Three Catholic activists who halted work [1] at one of the central facilities in the nation's nuclear weapons complex in July with an act of civil disobedience released photos Monday of their action that show splashed blood and painted messages on the walls of a uranium storage site.

The three, an 82-year-old Catholic sister and two middle-aged men connected with the Catholic Worker movement, were able to enter far into the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge, Tenn., before being arrested outside the nation?s only facility for manufacturing, processing, and storing weapons-grade uranium.

The photos, taken the morning after the activists' break-in, were released to the activists by the government Monday as part of preparations for their trials in February.

The activists -- Sr. Megan Rice, 82, a member of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus; Michael Walli, a member of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker community in Washington, D.C.; and Greg Boertje-Obed, a former U.S. Army officer from Duluth, Minn -- call themselves the Transform Now Plowshares. They said they wished to "indict the U.S. government" for its nuclear weapons modernization program and for planning to build a new facility at the Y-12 site.

The activists are accused of defacing the Y-12 complex's Highly Enriched Uranium Materials Facility, described by the government [2] as a "vital national security asset," after cutting through several fences early July 28.

A number of slogans appear between dried trails of blood on the complex walls, stating, "The fruit of justice is peace," "Disarm," "Transform" and "Peace not war."

Although initially jailed after their arrest, the activists have each been released until their trial, scheduled for Feb. 26 in the U.S. District Court of Eastern Tennessee.

"These photographs carry with them our message," the activists wrote in a press release accompanying the photos Monday.

"We came to Y12 in a spirit of hope, not fear. We were authorized -- even required -- to act by the responsibilities placed on us as citizens," the statement reads. "We also felt called, as children of God, to act on behalf of all God's children, including and especially those who are threatened daily by the machines of war and the power of empire."

The July break-in led to a two-week shutdown [3] of work at the plant and spurred criticism of the facility's security from the highest levels of the federal government.

Secretary of Energy Steven Chu said in a statement Aug. 4 that the incident was "an unacceptable and deeply troubling breach" of security. The Energy Department's inspector general, Gregory Friedman, said the security

system at the site showed "troubling displays of ineptitude" in an Aug. 31 report [4] on the incident.

The government ended its contract with the complex's security firm two months after the break-in, saying in a Sept. 28 letter [5] obtained by the *Knoxville News Sentinel* it had "grave concerns" about their management.

In the last several years, activists in the Oak Ridge area have been protesting a planned new facility for the complex, called the Uranium Processing Facility, which the National Nuclear Security Administration says is needed to replace aging buildings and facilities, some of which date to 1945.

Federal estimates have placed the price tag of the new facility, one of three planned by the security administration, at about $6.5 billion.

After spending approximately $500 million on the designs for the project, its leaders announced Oct. 3 [6] they would need to commission a redesign because of concerns over the safety plans and spacing issues.

The activists said in a statement released after their July arrests that they used blood "for healing and pouring out our lives in service and love. Our very humanity depends on lives given, not taken. But blood also reminds us of the horrific spilling of blood by nuclear weapons."

Each activist faces three separate charges of destruction of property, "depredation" of government property, and trespassing.

The first two counts are felonies and carry maximum jail sentences of five and 10 years, respectively. The third is a misdemeanor and carries a maximum jail sentence of a year and a maximum fine of $100,000.

The name the activists chose for their action, Transform Now Plowshares, references a number of actions against nuclear weapons taken by Catholic activists in the last three decades, referencing the exhortation found in the books of Micah and Isaiah to turn swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.

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