

STAT

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 6.WALL STREET JOURNAL
29 April 1982

Argentina's Nuclear-Weapon Capability Is Estimated to Be Closer Than Thought

By JOHN J. FIALKA
And GERALD F. SEIH

Staff Reporters of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON — U.S. intelligence estimates circulating on Capitol Hill and elsewhere here suggest that Argentina may be closer to entering the "club" of nations that have nuclear-weapons capability than had been thought.

Although U.S. analysts reportedly believe that Argentina is still some months or years away from building a bomb, the new assessments, coming in the midst of the Falklands crisis, heighten concern about Argentina's growing tendency to use its political and military powers.

Part of the new concern, according to several government sources, is that there have been large "accounting gaps" in methods used to monitor the nuclear fuel being loaded into and removed from Atucha I, Argentina's commercial nuclear-power reactor near Buenos Aires.

The gaps, discovered in the International Atomic Energy Agency's surveillance system covering the plant, could mean that Argentina has been able to draw substantial amounts of plutonium away from its civilian power program without detection. Intelligence experts reportedly are divided, however, on whether these gaps actually have been used as a pathway for nuclear diversion.

"We're very concerned about Argentina's program," was the way one U.S. specialist on the matter put it. Calling Argentina's approach to nuclear technology "very, very sophisticated," the specialist added: "we aren't talking about a Third World program in any way, shape or form."

"This thing is extremely sensitive right now, that's all I can tell you," said a U.S. official who has attended briefings on the Argentine nuclear program. Both sources asked not to be identified by name.

Argentine officials have repeatedly insisted in recent months that their 27-year-old effort to develop an independent nuclear-power program will result in only peaceful uses of atomic energy, although they have managed to avoid most international controls and treaties covering the subject.

A nuclear-power reactor creates plutonium, a nuclear-weapons material, as its uranium fuel changes in the process of fissioning. Atucha I has been in operation since 1974, long enough to produce about 1,000 pounds of plutonium. It takes about 30 pounds of plutonium to make a small nuclear weapon.

However, several sources involved in deliberations over Argentina's nuclear programs have concluded that while Argentina may have access to bomb-grade plutonium, fabricating a usable nuclear weapon, if it decided to do so, still could take some time.

Eduardo Jantus, press attache at the Argentine Embassy here, said he couldn't comment on the possibility of a diversion at Atucha I "because that's a fabrication." Carlos Martinez Vidal, a former head of Argentina's Atomic Energy Commission who now works here for the Organization of American States, insisted that it would be "impossible to use (Atucha's fuel) for anything but peaceful uses."

Earlier this year, before the Falklands crisis, Vice Admiral Carlos Castro Madero, current chairman of Argentina's nuclear agency, said that the spent nuclear fuel accumulating at Atucha I and amounts that will be created at two other power reactors being built constitute a "plutonium mine" that will be separated, recycled into nuclear fuel and sold to foreign countries.

Having what is known as a complete nuclear-fuel cycle—one which includes the ability to separate and reuse plutonium—the vice admiral added, wouldn't provoke a strong reaction from the U.S. "because at the present time the dependence of the Argentine nuclear program on the United States is practically nil.

"For that reason," he told a Brazilian reporter, "the only thing that can happen is an improvement because relations and cooperation in our field with the United States couldn't be worse."

A major source of Argentina's independence stems from the type of power reactor it purchased from West Germany. Atucha I is a "heavy water" reactor that uses natural uranium fuel and, unlike the more common "light water" reactors, doesn't require the special enriched uranium fuel obtainable only from the U.S., the Soviet Union or Western Europe.

Emanuel Morgan, a former safeguards inspector for the International Atomic Energy Agency, said that the Atucha I type of reactor is the most difficult type to monitor because its nuclear fuel is loaded and unloaded constantly and it doesn't need to be closed for regular inventories.

"Because the reactor can run on less than a full fuel load, there may be more fuel in the reactor than has been declared. Or some fuel may have been taken out that was never declared," he said.

Mr. Morgan, who recently wrote a report on the agency's problems for the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, emphasized that he wasn't familiar with the specific problems at Atucha I, only with the difficulties related to monitoring that type of reactor.

"There are lapses in surveillance," he noted, because agency inspectors can't be present at all times. In their absence, cameras are used to watch the reloading of the reactor and the storage of spent nuclear fuel in a nearby cooling pond, but the cameras don't always work very well, he said.

Mr. Morgan's general criticisms of the agency prompted the NRC commissioners to conclude last November that they weren't confident that the international agency, a Vienna-based branch of the United Nations, could give timely warning of a nuclear diversion. And that, in turn, prompted a barrage of 39 questions from Rep. Richard Ottinger (D., N.Y.), chairman of a House energy subcommittee. He wanted to know, among other things, whether the NRC has seen evidence of a diversion from a facility policed by the international agency.

In March, Nunzio Palladino, NRC chairman, replied with 38 answers, noting that "appropriate Executive Branch agencies" had ordered that the question and answer to the matter of evidence of a nuclear diversion be classified as sensitive information.

This has resulted in a great deal of private speculation in Congress over which country might be involved and several sources indicate that Argentina is high on the list of suspects. George R. LaPlante, an attorney for the Central Intelligence Agency, has since warned the NRC that the NRC can't legally release "certain CIA-originated information" that is classified.

Meanwhile, Argentina has been getting considerable outside help in its efforts to become a major, independent source of nuclear fuel and technology.

The Atucha reactor requires heavy water to control its reaction and recently the Soviet Union agreed to supply Atucha with five tons of heavy water, an atomically altered isotope of water. Sulzer Brothers, a Swiss company, is supplying Argentina with machinery to build its own heavy water plant, scheduled to begin operations in 1984. France has been involved in the construction of Argentina's uranium-milling plants and Canada and Italy are involved in building an additional heavy water nuclear-power reactor.