

Nun Breaks into Nuke Plant

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) -- The security contractor at the Y-12 nuclear weapons plant in Tennessee was fired Monday after authorities said three protesters cut through fences and vandalized a building in an unprecedented break-in.

Security contractor WSI Oak Ridge said it has started winding down operations and will transfer its protective force functions to B&W Y-12, the managing contractor at the plant, over the next several weeks. The Department of Energy had earlier recommended that WSI's contract be terminated.

The security contractor was criticized for its poor response when the protesters, including an 82-year-old Roman Catholic nun, cut through fences on July 28 and defaced a building that stores the plant's weapons grade uranium.

Peter Stockton, a Department of Energy adviser on nuclear security during the Clinton administration, called the firing long overdue.

"This the most egregious thing we've ever run into," said Stockton, a senior investigator with the Project On Government Oversight. "It's the worst of the worst."

POGO, a Washington-based independent watchdog known for exposing overpriced military parts and other government shortcomings, has been a frequent critic of security lapses at the facility.

The Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge makes uranium parts for every warhead in the U.S. nuclear arsenal. It also dismantles old weapons and is the nation's primary storehouse for bomb-grade uranium. Officials insist that there was never any danger of activists getting to materials that could be detonated on site or used to assemble a dirty bomb.

After the intrusion, top officials at WSI and B&W were removed from their positions, though Stockton questioned why no members of the federal government have lost their jobs.

"I think all the feds have a dodged a bullet on this," he said.

B&W said it supported the recommendation by the federal government.

WSI Oak Ridge is a subsidiary of Palm Beach Gardens, Fla.-based G4S Government Solutions Inc., which was formerly known as Wackenhut.

Sister Megan Rice and her co-defendants face federal charges that could carry a maximum prison sentence of 16 years if they are convicted.

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Other than heading out before dawn, the protesters did little to conceal their nearly half-mile trek into the restricted area where signs warn intruders they could be shot. According to court documents, they used bolt cutters to get through three fences, tripping alarms in the process.

A report by the Department of Energy's inspector general blamed significant security failures for the unprecedented intrusion, including broken detection equipment, a poor response from security guards and insufficient federal oversight of private contractors running the complex.

Security officers who heard the protesters beating on the walls of the building with a hammer had incorrectly assumed that they were construction workers, according to the report.

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