



Pentagon, Eyeing Iran, Wants to Rush 30,000-Pound Bomb Program

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By Tony Capaccio

July 31 (Bloomberg) -- The U.S. Defense Department wants to accelerate by three years the deployment of a 30,000-pound bunker-buster bomb, a request that reflects growing unease over nuclear threats from Iran and North Korea.

Comptroller [Robert Hale](#), in a formal request to the four congressional defense committees earlier this month, asked permission to shift about \$68 million in the Pentagon's budget to this program to ensure the first four bombs could be mounted on stealthy B-2 bombers by July 2010.

Hale, in his July 8 request, said there was "an urgent operational need for the capability to strike hard and deeply buried targets in high-threat environments," and top commanders of U.S. forces in Asia and the Middle East "recently identified the need to expedite" the bomb program.

The bomb would be the U.S. military's largest and six times bigger than the 5,000-pound bunker buster that the Air Force now uses to attack deeply buried nuclear, biological or chemical sites.

Accelerating the program "is intended to, at the very least, give the president the option of conducting a strike to knock out Iran's main uranium enrichment capabilities," said [Ken Katzman](#), Middle East military expert for the non-partisan [Congressional Research Service](#).

Iran Given Deadline

President [Barack Obama](#) said Iran must respond by late September to an invitation for unconditional talks with the West on ending what's believed to be a nuclear weapons program. Secretary of Defense [Robert Gates](#) said this week in Israel that the offer is not open-ended, and his counterpart, [Ehud Barak](#), warned that Israel is considering all measures if diplomatic efforts fail.

Chicago-based [Boeing Co.](#) is developing the bomb which was successfully demonstrated in March 2007.

The B-2, developed by Los Angeles, California-based [Northrop Grumman Corp.](#), has a skin capable of evading radar and is the only U.S. bomber capable of penetrating air defenses such as those believed in use by North Korea and Iran. The B-2 bombed targets in the early days of NATO's Kosovo air campaign and in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

Little authoritative information has been published about the capability of the so-called "Massive Ordnance Penetrator." A December 2007 story by the Air Force News Service said it has a hardened-steel casing that is designed to reach targets up to 200 feet underground before exploding.

Essential Weapon

[Anthony Cordesman](#), a senior military analyst at the [Center For Strategic and International Studies](#) in Washington, said the U.S. "must have a non-nuclear capability to kill such targets if the U.S. is to have a convincing military option against Iran's proliferation and hardened or underground facilities in other potentially hostile states."

Still, even though the U.S. wants "this capability, especially for weapons of mass destruction targets, as soon as possible, that doesn't mean we'll use them -- but the planners are supposed to create capability and also send messages to potential adversaries," said [Michael O'Hanlon](#), a national

defense analyst with the nonpartisan [Brookings Institution](#).

Iran has at least two suspected subterranean nuclear facilities and other command-and-control sites not connected to the nuclear program, said Cordesman.

The new 20.5-foot-long bomb carries more than 5,300 pounds of explosives and is guided by Global Positioning Satellites, according to a [description](#) on the Web site of the Pentagon's Defense Threat Reduction Agency.

Air Force spokeswoman Lieutenant Colonel Karen Platt said Boeing could be put on contract within 72 hours to build the first bombs if Congress approves the shift of funds by mid- August.

Under the accelerated program, the B-2 "would be capable of carrying the bomb by July 2010," she said in an e-mail.

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