

Defence Committee

Select Committee Announcement

22 February 2012
For Immediate Release:

“MOD MUST BE MORE PROACTIVE TOWARDS THE ELECTRO-MAGNETIC THREAT”, SAYS DEFENCE COMMITTEE

The Government must improve on its current reactive posture to the threat of a major electro-magnetic pulse event, says the Defence Committee in its report, published today, entitled, “Developing Threats: Electro-Magnetic Pulses (EMP)”.

Technologies such as GPS, vital to the financial markets as well as the military, are known to be vulnerable to the effects of space weather or the EMP resultant from a nuclear weapon exploded at altitude. It is also possible to build non-nuclear devices which can disrupt electronic systems, though so far only over a limited area.

A severe space weather event is not necessarily seen as a military problem in the first instance, but it would be likely to meet the definition of an “emergency” under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and call for the help of the Armed Forces. Chair of the Committee, Rt Hon James Arbuthnot MP, says, **“The reactive posture described by the Government appears somewhat complacent. Space weather is a global threat and may affect many regions and countries simultaneously. It is time that the Government began to approach this matter with the seriousness it deserves.”**

The Committee is very concerned that there appears to be no one Government Department identified to take immediate lead responsibility should there be a severe space weather event. It is not good enough to say that that will depend on where the greatest impact fell. The Government must make clear exactly where lead responsibility in relation to EMP disturbances lies both nationally and within the MoD.

Defence alone cannot protect against the threat of EMP. It must be a concern of the National Security Council and civil contingency planners, with proper standards of protection developed with the vital service industries most at risk.

The effects of a High Altitude Electro-Magnetic Pulse Event as a result of a nuclear weapon exploded at high altitude, would be so serious that only government action could be expected to mitigate it. Chair of the Committee, Rt Hon James Arbuthnot MP, says, **“We are concerned that the Government does not regard EMP from a nuclear blast as currently being a high risk and so we urge that more vigorous action should be taken to prepare for such an attack. Similarly, an urgent reassessment should be made of the risk from non-nuclear EMP attack on vital national facilities.”**

Security of satellites is a matter of growing concern as our reliance upon such systems and the sheer number of satellites in orbit increase. The Government must consider the long-term security of satellite technology and ensure that national interests are protected where we rely on other nations for data, such as GPS. In the event of very severe space weather, even hardened satellite technology might be at risk of degradation. The MoD cannot therefore rule out the loss or degradation of satellite based-communications systems, and must plan for this eventuality.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

Committee Membership is as follows:

Rt Hon James Arbuthnot MP (Conservative, North East Hampshire) (Chair), Mr Julian Brazier MP, (Conservative, Canterbury), Thomas Docherty MP (Labour, Dunfermline and West Fife), Rt Hon Jeffrey M. Donaldson MP (Democratic Unionist, Lagan Valley), John Glen MP (Conservative, Salisbury), Mr Dai Havard MP (Labour, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney), Mrs Madeleine Moon MP (Labour, Bridgend), Penny Mordaunt MP (Conservative, Portsmouth North), Sandra Osborne MP (Labour, Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock), Sir Bob Russell MP, (Liberal Democrat, Colchester), Bob Stewart MP (Conservative, Beckenham), Ms Gisela Stuart MP (Labour, Birmingham, Edgbaston)

Specific Committee Information: defcom@parliament.uk 020 7219 5745

Media Enquiries: Alex Paterson patersona@parliament.uk 020 7219 1589 / 07917 488 488

Committee Website: www.parliament.uk/defcom

Watch committees and parliamentary debates online: www.parliamentlive.tv

Publications / Reports / Reference Material: Copies of all select committee reports are available from the Parliamentary Bookshop (12 Bridge St, Westminster, 020 7219 3890) or the Stationery Office (0845 7023474). Committee reports, press releases, evidence transcripts, Bills; research papers, a directory of MPs, plus Hansard (from 8am daily) and much more, can be found on www.parliament.uk