

Russian Missile Defense System Running Major Risk Of Error

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WASHINGTON (Agence France Presse) - Russia's early-warning missile defense system is operating at a third of its full capacity, increasing the risk of launch error, The Washington Post said Wednesday.

There were two close calls in 1983 and 1995 in which false attack signals were sent to Russian missile silos before they were recognized as mistakes, Russian and Western security analysts told the daily.

Only three of nine satellites needed to monitor U.S. missile silos and submarines are active, meaning that for several hours each day, Russian military commanders are left blind to a possible attack, the daily said.

The satellite network is deteriorating because financial problems have prevented Moscow from replenishing the array of satellites needed to keep its early-warning system in good working condition, said Paul Podvig, with the Center for Arms Control, Energy and Environmental Studies here.

Although the Cold War is over, Russia and the United States remain on constant nuclear alert, threatening massive retaliation once enemy missiles are detected in flight.

However, the threat of retaliation requires accurate early-warning, and some Western specialists believe the growing gaps in Russia's early-warning satellites have increased the risk of serious miscalculation, because Russian commanders have less time to decide if a launch report is real.

In 1983, the daily said, the Soviet system sent false signals of a U.S. missile attack which lasted a few minutes before an officer on duty deep inside a Soviet defense bunker recognized the mistake. And in 1995, a Norwegian scientific rocket set off a false alarm in the Russian early-warning system that was reported all the way to Russian President Boris Yeltsin, the daily added. ((c) 1999 Agence France Presse)

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