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Largest Conventional Bomb Dropped in a Test in Florida

By THOM SHANKER

WASHINGTON, March 11 — The Air Force today successfully tested in Florida the largest conventional bomb in the American arsenal, a munition so massive that its 18,000 pounds of high explosives must be dropped from the rear of a cargo plane, officials said.

The bomb explodes a few feet above the ground, and is designed to send a devastating wave of fire and blast hundreds of yards to kill troops, flatten trees, knock over structures, collapse cave entrances and, in general, demoralize those far beyond the impact zone.

The weapon is officially called the Massive Ordnance Air Blast, but the initials have already been recast to name it the "Mother of All Bombs."

The reference to language used by Saddam Hussein during the Persian Gulf war is no accident. The new bomb, still in its test phase, could be dropped on Iraq should President Bush order the nation to war.

"There is a psychological component to all aspects of warfare," Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said at a Pentagon news briefing today.

"The goal is not to have a war," Mr. Rumsfeld said. Short of that, he added, "The goal is to have the capabilities of the coalition so clear and so obvious that there is an enormous disincentive for the Iraqi military to fight."

Of the new bomb, he said, "This is not small."

The entire weapon weighs 21,500 pounds, including a satellite guidance system intended to bring the bomb closer to its target than its predecessor, the 15,000-pound BLU-82, which fell to earth unguided.

The MOAB is carried aloft aboard an MC-130, a cargo plane flown by Air Force Special Operations Forces. The bomb rolls out the rear cargo door of the plane on a pallet, and a parachute yanks it free of the aircraft. The pallet and parachute then separate from the bomb.

A handful of the BLU-82's were used in Afghanistan to destroy caves believed to be used by forces of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, as well as to frighten any troops dug into trenches who were not immediately killed by the weapon.

The BLU-82, nicknamed the Daisy Cutter, was initially designed for use in Vietnam to flatten the jungle to create landing zones for helicopters.

Today's blast, which was reported to have sent a cloud of dirt and debris high into the air over a test range at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., was the first test of the weapon's explosive power.

Two nonexplosive tests were conducted earlier to try the bomb's launching and mechanical workings, the most recent being last Friday, said Cheryl Irwin, a Pentagon spokeswoman.

Ms. Irwin described today's test as a success, saying, "It did what it was supposed to do."

Officials said they were unaware if the name MOAB was chosen for a biblical reference. According to Genesis, Moab was born through an incestuous relationship between Lot and a daughter following the destruction of Sodom. The Book of Numbers tells how the Israelites chose the Plains of Moab as their final camp before entering the Promised Land.