A U.K. government inquiry has blamed two companies for failure in safety assessments that led to the deaths of 14 Royal Air Force servicemen in 2006.

The deaths were the result of an explosion of a Nimrod reconnaissance plane over Afghanistan, and the inquiry blamed BAE Systems Plc and QinetiQ Group Plc for failing to do a proper job in preparing safety studies. The U.K. report, prepared by attorney Charles Haddon-Cave, found that the results of the companies’ work were “a lamentable job from start to finish.”

The London-based BAE, assisted by QinetiQ, assessed the safety of Nimrods between 2001 and 2005. BAE is currently Europe’s largest weapons manufacturer.

“The company demonstrated incompetence, complacency and cynicism,” Haddon-Cave said in a press conference after the report's release. “The responsibility for this must lie with the leadership of the company.” According to the report, BAE spent a “significant amount” of time “building a wall of denial and obfuscation which the review has had to dismantle.”

The report named three members of BAE management — Chris Lowe, the chief airworthiness engineer; Richard Oldfield, the task leader; and Eric Prince, flight systems and avionics manager — as bearing “primary responsibility.”

The report also stated that those primarily responsible at QinetiQ, a military research company split off from the U.K. defense ministry in 2006, were Martyn Mahy, task manager, and Colin Blagrove, technical assurance manager.

In an emailed statement, BAE responded that “the cause of the accident will never finally be determined. The company will consider and assess how best to support the Ministry of Defence in the implementation of the recommendations for improving processes to further enhance the operational safety of aircraft in military use.”

In its own email statement, QinetiQ replied, “Given the breadth and depth of Mr. Haddon-Cave’s report, QinetiQ wishes to take time to digest the report fully before making any detailed response. We want to emphasize that QinetiQ will seek to learn from all that the report says.”

The U.K. inquiry found that the safety report provided by BAE “was riddled with errors” and “missed the key dangers,” and went on to state that BAE “deliberately did not disclose to its customer the scale of the hazards. These matters raised question marks about the prevailing ethical culture at BAE Systems.”

The report found that QinetiQ also bears a share of responsibility, because the company “failed properly to carry out its role as independent adviser. QinetiQ’s approach was fundamentally lax and compliant.”

The government and military commanders were also criticized in the report, which found that organizational changes and financial cutbacks have hurt the safety oversight of the Ministry of Defence.

The 14 deaths occurred when the 37-year-old aircraft exploded after a mid-air refueling operation. Fuel overflow was cited as the likely cause of the accident. As a result of the accident, the practice of in-flight refueling of Nimrods has ceased.

Source: Bloomberg.com