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U.S. Preparing New Production Of Nerve Gases

House Focus on Safety Overcame Opposition

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PINE BLUFF ARSENAL, Ark. — At the new Army chemical factory that local residents nonchalantly call "the nerve gas plant," the waiting conveyor belts are wrapped in protective plastic.

The kettles and scrubbers were tested in June and pronounced ready, pending only the final pull of political levers in Washington. If that comes — both supporters and opponents say they expect the House to pass the bill in a final vote in September — the Pine Bluff Arsenal and the Federal Government will be back in the chemical weapon business for the first time in 16 years.

Genesis of New Program

Manufacture of chemical weapons was halted in 1969 by President Nixon in what he called an "initiative toward peace." But research continued, and in 1974 the Army requested money to begin producing a new type of chemical weapon, not on the ground of military necessity but in the name of safety.

Unlike existing weapons, which already contain the deadly agents, the new weapons will hold two nonlethal ingredients of the nerve agent in separate canisters. They mix to form the deadly agent only after the weapon is fired. The two components that make up the binary poison can be stored separately until they are brought to the battlefield. The bill nearing Congressional approval would require that the components be stored in separate states.

The nerve agents would be produced for two new weapons. One is a 155-millimeter shell to deliver GB, a poison that disperses in about 20 minutes so that attackers can move in. The other, the new Bigeye bomb, will spray droplets of VX, a poison that may render an area deadly for hours or days.

Ready to Produce in a Year

At Pine Bluff, the new factory is not to manufacture the binary gases but canisters of methylphosphonic difluoride, a corrosive but nonlethal component of the GB artillery shell. Officials here say that if Congress approves production, they could begin acquiring chemicals, train a crew and be ready to begin manufacture within a year. An-

other plant, scheduled for construction here next year, would produce one agent for the Bigeye bomb. The other agents for the two chemical weapons would be purchased from contractors, who have not been selected yet.

The existing chemical weapons, with an average age of 26 years, are stored in bunkers of reinforced concrete, covered with earth, at Pine Bluff and nine other locations, including West Germany.

The Army and the General Accounting Office, an investigative arm of Congress, say that while some of the older weapons leak, the storage facilities are well secured. But the Army says that in time of crisis the weapons could be risky to move.

Suitability of Weapons

Moreover, the Defense Department estimates that 93 percent of the existing chemical weapons are not designed for the way the Army fights today. For example, the inventory contains no usable bombs or long-range missiles to hit deep behind enemy lines.

"Even if you believe the current stockpile is adequate now, nevertheless it does have a shelf life," said Representative John M. Spratt Jr., Democrat of South Carolina, a recent convert to support of chemical weapons.

The Soviet Union, according to knowledgeable government officials, has not produced binary weapons, but intelligence agencies generally agree that the Soviet Union has an extensive chemical arsenal and that Russian troops are drilled in fighting a chemical war.

The United States and the Soviet Union have both taken part in a 40-nation arms conference in Geneva aimed at a complete ban on possession of chemical weapons, but those talks have been stalled for years over the issue of verification.

Nonetheless, the Pentagon, in its lobbying campaign, argued strongly that a new weapon program might induce the Soviet Union to talk more seriously about a treaty banning all chemical weapons. Lawmakers and Pentagon officials said that hope may have swayed some votes.

Intensive Lobbying Campaign

The Reagan Administration has been lobbying for its plan for new chemical weapons since 1982. Each year the Senate has given its approval only to have the proposal die in the House. It is the only major weapon Congress denied Mr. Reagan in his first term.

This year the Pentagon, sensing that it was best to fight such a volatile issue in a nonelection year, made the nerve gas program its top priority, said Russell A. Rourke, Assistant Secretary of Defense for legislative affairs. "It was this year, or not at all in the near and medium term," he said.

Beginning in February, Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger and senior military officials who trooped to Congress to testify on the budget all made a point of including a special pitch for chemical weapons.

In March, Mr. Reagan appointed a commission to study the matter. The panel suffered credibility problems because no avowed critics were included, but its report in support of the new weapons, published the week before the vote, was widely read. Several members of the panel, including the chairman, Walter J. Stoessel Jr., a former diplomat, and two respected former House members, joined personally in the lobbying campaign.

Mr. Rourke said that Pentagon lobbying teams conducted individual briefings for 155 members of Congress in the months before the vote, stressing safety and arms control. They focused on new members who had not committed themselves before — 28 of 30 newly elected Republicans who voted on chemical weapons ended up supporting the Pentagon — and on opponents who indicated they were open to compromise.

For members who wondered why the military could not rely on masks and protective suits, the Pentagon arranged demonstrations showing how a soldier encased in such gear would be nearly immobilized. For members and aides skeptical of the Soviet threat, the Pentagon arranged intelligence briefings that charged the Soviet Union with plunging ahead in research on new chemical weapons and toxins.

"Wherever anti-nerve-gas lobbyists went," said John Isaacs, who lobbied against the weapon for the Council for a Livable World, "Pentagon lobbyists had been there first."
