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Chemical arms talks nearing with U.S. far behind Soviets

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The United States is approaching its latest round of chemical weapons control talks — approved by President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev at their Geneva summit — with the knowledge that the Russians are so far ahead in this field the Americans may never catch up.

Since President Richard Nixon ended the U.S. chemical weapons program in November 1969, the Soviets have had the field to themselves. They have made the most of this advantage.

Congress has approved a restart of U.S. chemical weapons production after Oct. 1, 1986, but only binary systems, which consist of two separated non-lethal substances that do not become lethal until mixed.

Production would be contingent on the president certifying to Congress that a plan exists to deploy the weapons in Europe in an emergency, that a verifiable chemical weapons agreement with the Soviet Union doesn't exist and that production is necessary for national security. Production could begin 60 days after such certification is provided.

The binary system is considerably safer to handle than the Soviet nerve gases. Nevertheless, every time deployment of chemical agents has been raised with America's NATO allies, particularly West Germany, the reaction has been negative.

Today, at least 100,000 elite Soviet chemical corps troops are believed deployed among Warsaw Pact forces. In August 1984, a National Academy of Sciences study for the U.S. Army estimated that 35 percent of all conventional — non-nuclear — munitions in the Soviet Army were chemical or biological toxin.

Every regular Soviet soldier is issued a respirator and chemical protection suit; all modern Soviet armored force vehicles are designed to operate in a chemically contaminated environment.

The Soviet lead in production of chemical weapons may never be erased. A full 14 Soviet chemical, biological and toxin agent factories turn out 10,000 tons of lethal substances a year, according to conservative estimates. By contrast, the United States has manufactured no chemical weapons since 1969 and has destroyed all its biological toxin weapons.

For at least a decade, the Soviets have been developing so-called "third generation" germ warfare weapons based on recombinant DNA techniques. Said the authoritative British volume, "Russian Military Power," "It must be assumed that in any major conflict the Soviet ground forces will use chemical weapons as a matter of course."

Military analysts believe the Soviets have developed a "no-warning blitzkrieg" strategy that would give the Third Shock Army in East Germany the option of launching a sudden strike against the West without a giveaway major mobilization.

A surprise attack deep into West Germany would place Soviet forces in urban centers and inhibit NATO from counterattacking with nuclear weapons. Central to this strategy is the massive employment of chemical and bacteriological weapons to terrify and paralyze the NATO armies.

The architect of this strategy is Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, the controversial, brilliant former chief of staff, who Mr. Gorbachev reinstated as commander of the Soviet Union's largest troop concentration in the Western theater.

Marshal Ogarkov's "can win" concepts emphasize high-speed offensives through battlefields contaminated with nuclear, biological and chemical agents. The key weapon in such an onslaught would be the legendary and still overwhelming BM-21 Multiple Rocket Launcher, the Stalin Organ. Twenty launchers in a battery can fire 480 rockets in 30 seconds to blanket at least 20

square kilometers. The Stalin Organ was used with devastating effect at Stalingrad in 1942.

In addition, the Soviets have at

least 2,000 tactical missiles deployed in the Western theater, including FROGs and SCUDs capable of carrying chemical or biological payloads.

The key chemical weapon in the Soviet arsenal remains soman, a "sticky" nerve gas. It is the most lethal agent developed by the Nazis during World War II. In the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Soviet tanks the Israelis captured from Egypt carried detoxifying systems for soman contamination.

The United States has never deployed soman. Its post-World War II chemical arsenal, long since scrapped, was built on sarin nerve gas. Some think this indicates the Soviets plan to use soman on an unrestricted scale in combat.

The Soviets have also developed lethal biological mycotoxins which they have "field tested" in Laos, Cambodia and Afghanistan during the past decade.

The State Department reported that, up to May 1979, some 800 to 1,000 Hmong tribesmen had been killed by "Yellow Rain" in chemical, biological warfare operations by the Communists in Laos. This was a clerical error. The actual figure — indicated by the research of Col. Charles W. Lewis, chief of dermatology at the Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, pointed to 15,000 to 20,000 gas deaths.

After treating Iranian victims of Iraqi mustard and mycotoxin gas in the Gulf War, Dr. Gernot Pauser of the University of Vienna Hospital concluded: "If there were this kind of attack in Europe, we would have no chance at all to survive."

The gases used by the Iraqis were supplied by the Soviet Union.

In World War II, Hitler was deterred from using his nerve gas on the D-Day bridgeheads only because he wrongly believed that the Allies had equally devastating stocks with which to retaliate. It is unlikely the Soviets are equally uninformed.