

Russia Speeds Chemical Weapon Disposal

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[Michael Nguyen](#)

The destruction of Russia's massive Soviet-era chemical weapons stockpile has been proceeding glacially, but recent actions by Russian and U.S. leaders may allow this pace to be accelerated substantially.

With slightly more than 40,000 metric tons, Russia has the world's largest declared stockpile of chemical weapons but is the furthest from completing the destruction process among the six states that have pledged to eliminate declared stockpiles under the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Russia has been given multiple interim-deadline extensions and has been granted in principle the one-time, five-year extension to the final deadline of 2007, but U.S. officials doubt it will meet the extended deadline either. By the end of 2004, Russia had destroyed less than 3 percent of its stockpile.

To speed up destruction, President Vladimir Putin signed the 2005 federal budget approved by the Duma and Federation Council into law Dec. 24 providing \$400 million for chemical weapons destruction, more than twice the \$186 million allocated in 2004. Russian officials attributed the large increase to an effort to make up for what they said was disappointing support from international donors.

Col. Gen. Victor Kholstov, head of the Russian chemical demilitarization program, and other officials have pointed to a report from the Russian government that found that only 30 percent of the funds designated by the United States for Russian chemical weapons disposal activities were being given to Russia; the rest was being used to monitor the use of the funds. However, when pressed as to whether the Kremlin had counted U.S. funding used to purchase equipment in the United States, Kholstov admitted that the 30 percent figure included only what had been transferred to Russia's Federal Agency on Industry.

In the United States, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) plans to reintroduce legislation next year that would eliminate six conditions placed by lawmakers on U.S. funding of a major chemical weapons destruction facility at Shchuch'ye. (See ACT, December 2004.) In the past, these stipulations have suspended or delayed the flow of such funds to Russia. Since 2002, President George W. Bush has had and used the authority to waive the conditions on national security grounds, but it has been necessary for Congress to renew the waiver authority each year.

The most recent defense authorization bill granted the president waiver authority through December 2006. The president signed a waiver of these stipulations Nov. 29, releasing U.S. funding through the end of the 2005 calendar year. The fiscal 2005 defense authorization bill earmarks \$158.4 million through September toward the construction of the chemical weapons destruction plant at Shchuch'ye.

Two conditions have been particularly difficult to meet, making a waiver necessary. One requires that Russia develop a practical plan for nerve agent destruction, while the other requires that Russia destroy all nerve agents at a single location. In a 2001 agreement, Russia pledged to complete the destruction process of all nerve agents at the Shchuch'ye facility.

Patrick Wakefield, deputy assistant to the secretary of defense for chemical demilitarization and threat reduction, told a Moscow audience in November that Russia and the United States had

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recently agreed to a more realistic plan to complete construction by July 2008 and begin destruction in mid-2009. Russia had been insisting that the facility would be ready by 2006.

The Shchuch'ye requirement, however, remains a sticking point.

The original intent of the requirement to destroy all nerve agents at one location was to protect the U.S. investment in the Shchuch'ye facility, where the United States expects to spend \$1 billion over the course of the project—a hefty price tag for a location that only has 13.6 percent of Russia's chemical weapons stockpile.

The stipulations have generated resentment on the Russian side, with one Russian official telling a U.S. audience late last summer that the requirement was setting Russia up for failure because there was not enough time to destroy all the nerve agent at one facility. The requirements would also require Russia to transport chemical munitions and agent, or caustic reaction mass (the by-product of the neutralization process), over several hundred miles by rail.

The Russians have pointed out that, by contrast, the United States plans to construct destruction facilities at each of its present chemical weapons storage locations and that plans to transport the reaction mass ran into significant opposition by local communities.

A report completed last April by the General Accounting Office (now the Government Accountability Office) agreed with the Russian assessment, noting that, if the Shchuch'ye plant operated at its full destruction capacity of 1,700 metric tons per year, Russia would not complete the destruction of its nerve agent stockpile until 2027.

Russian nerve agents are stored at five different locations, including Shchuch'ye, and Russian officials have suggested that it may decide to construct disposal facilities at all locations. Several countries have committed funding for additional nerve agent destruction facilities. Although additional international donors were welcomed, one U.S. official cautioned that Russia may turn around and blame new donors for future delays.

The original agreement with the United States allows Russia to perform some neutralization on-site but required all nerve agent reaction mass to be transported to Shchuch'ye and destroyed. Russia has not finalized its plans and could choose to finish the neutralization process at each location or set the reaction mass aside for use in commercial industrial processes. Either option would violate the agreement with the United States and the conditions imposed by Congress.

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