

Russian Officials Deny Claims Of Missing Nuclear Weapons

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THE CONTINUING debate over Russia's command and control of its nuclear arsenal intensified on September 7 when retired General Alexander Lebed, former secretary of the Russian Security Council, told the CBS news program "60 Minutes" that he believes more than 100 "suitcase sized" nuclear weapons are unaccounted for. Lebed's charge elicited an immediate response from several senior Russian government officials, including Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, who denied the existence of these weapons—known in the West as atomic demolition munitions (ADMs)—and argued that the Russian arsenal remains safe and secure. The State Department also reiterated its strong confidence in Russia's command and control system. Lebed's account is detailed in a new book, *One Point Safe*, by journalists Andrew and Leslie Cockburn.

Although lacking in many specific details, Lebed told "60 Minutes" that the 1 kiloton weapons, once assigned to the Spetsnaz special forces of the former Soviet Union, are especially dangerous because they can be transported and detonated by a single person. Made in the form of a suitcase, he said these devices are not protected by launch codes and could be prepared in approximately 30 minutes, potentially killing 50,000 to 100,000 people if detonated in a large city. Lebed said he attempted to make an inventory of the weapons while he was Security Council secretary but was unable to complete it before being fired by President Boris Yeltsin in October 1996.

In May 1997, Lebed informed six members of Congress about these missing weapons during their visit to Moscow. Lebed told the delegation, led by Representative Curt Weldon (R PA), that he could only locate 48 out of the 132 suitcase sized nuclear devices. However, during his "60 Minutes" appearance in September, Lebed asserted that more than 100 out of an estimated total of 250 weapons are unaccounted for. Although uncertain about their location, he speculated that they could be somewhere in Georgia, Ukraine or the Baltic states.

Subsequently, former Russian government officials elaborated on Lebed's account. In a September 13 interview with Interfax, Lebed's former deputy, Vladimir Denisov, said he led a special working group in July 1996 to explore whether the weapons had been deployed. According to Denisov, the working group concluded within two months that there were no such devices in the active Russian arsenal and that all the weapons were in "appropriate" storage facilities. However, he said the group could not rule out the possibility that similar weapons were located in Ukraine, Georgia or the Baltic states.

Then, in a September 22 interview with the Russian network NTV, Alexei Yablokov, a former environmental advisor to Yeltsin, maintained that suitcase sized nuclear weapons were developed for the Russian KGB in the 1970s. "I have spoken to the people who made these bombs, so I know that they exist," he said.

Lebed's claim has provoked a sharp response from several Russian government agencies responsible for safeguarding nuclear weapons—the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Atomic Energy (MINATOM) and the Federal Security Service—as well as key officials in the Yeltsin administration. While traveling in Lithuania just days before the "60 Minutes" episode, Chernomyrdin ridiculed Lebed's account as "absolute stupidity" and said that "all Russian nuclear weapons are under the total and absolutely reliable control of the Russian armed forces." Yeltsin's spokesman, Sergei Yastrzhembsky, also challenged the credibility of Lebed's claim. "Lebed is looking for pretexts to remind the people about himself. I believe this is not the best way," he said September 10.

That same day, MINATOM and the Federal Security Service issued strong statements contradicting Lebed's story. MINATOM stated that the existing Russian nuclear command and control system

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"guarantees full control over the nuclear charges and seals off any channels of their unauthorized movements." The statement also noted that all former Soviet strategic and tactical nuclear weapons have been returned to Russia, refuting Lebed's point that the weapons may be located in Georgia, Ukraine or the Baltic states. Moreover, the Federal Security Service, whose primary function is to block the unauthorized use of Russian nuclear weapons, declared that "no serious decrease in the security, let alone loss or theft, of nuclear weapons and their components has been detected."

On September 5, Vladimir Utavenko, a spokesman for the Ministry of Defense, said "there are no nuclear bombs in Russia out of [the] control of the Russian armed forces." Utavenko also questioned the credibility of Lebed on this particular issue because "he never dealt with nuclear security questions and cannot know the situation."

Furthermore, Lieutenant General Igor Volynkin, head of the Defense Ministry's 12th Main Directorate (which controls the production, operation and storage of Russian nuclear weapons) said in a September 25 news briefing that such devices "were never produced and are not produced." Although admitting that the production of suitcase sized nuclear weapons is theoretically possible, Volynkin said it would be a "very expensive and ineffective undertaking" because they would only have a short life span and would require frequent maintenance.

In a September 5 State Department briefing, deputy spokesman James Foley said, "The government of Russia has assured us that it retains adequate command and control of its nuclear arsenal and that appropriate physical security arrangements exist for these weapons and facilities." Foley also said the United States is providing assistance to Russia under the Cooperative Threat Reduction ("Nunn Lugar") program to bolster the physical security of its nuclear storage facilities.

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