October 2000

Secretary of Energy Bill Richardson signed an agreement with the Russian navy in Vladivostok August 31 which will facilitate expanded cooperation on the protection of fissile material that poses a proliferation threat. Admiral Vladimir Kuroyedov, commander-in-chief of the Russian Navy, had approved the agreement August 28. According to the Department of Energy (DOE), the agreement will provide a framework for future threat reduction projects in the naval sphere.

Rose Gottemoeller, acting deputy administrator for defense nuclear nonproliferation, said in a September 22 interview that "by setting basic parameters for implementing U.S.-Russian cooperation, the agreement will open the door to additional projects with the Russian navy" and "speed up" existing and future projects. The agreement, considered "sensitive" and therefore unavailable to the public, also establishes a joint group to "oversee future cooperation," according to a DOE official.

Prior to the signing of the agreement, cooperative work at naval facilities was implemented through a series of individual protocols negotiated to cover specific projects. According to the official, "As the Russian navy requested expanded cooperation, it became apparent to both sides that a formal arrangement was required." The agreement was negotiated at the behest of the Russian navy after DOE worked out a similar agreement with the Russian Ministry of Atomic Energy last year.

DOE cooperation with the Russian navy on fissile material security is part of the larger Material Protection, Control, and Accounting Program. That program seeks to prevent the diversion of weapons usable nuclear material in Russia through cooperative projects that upgrade physical security and accounting systems at relevant Russian facilities, for example by installing fences and radiation-detecting equipment. Cooperation to upgrade the security of naval nuclear materials dates back to 1996.

In a September 18 statement to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Richardson highlighted the recently signed agreement and noted that the Russian navy had subsequently presented him with "other submarine-assistance proposals, which are being examined now by the U.S. government."