

Is There a Russian Nuclear Mafia?

In the next few days the American administration will publish a report about those Russian biological programs that may be used for military purposes.

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"The publication of the report was postponed in order to avoid overshadowing Boris Yeltsin's visit to the United States," said Brad Roberts from the United States Center for Strategic and International Studies. "Even now it will be hardly pleasant to the Russian authorities." Roberts was speaking at the conference on non-proliferation problems that just ended in Minsk.

The MN correspondent was the only journalist admitted to the conference jointly arranged by the Belarusian center for exports control and non-proliferation and the Institute of International Studies in Monterey. How real is the threat of the spread of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons on the planet? Experts do not rule out that the spread of mass destruction weapons to the "threshold states" of the third world may come from the ex-USSR countries.

Consequently, reports appear occasionally on the attempts of state, quasi-state or private firms to sell to dubious foreign clients materials that can be used in the production of nuclear and chemical weapons, as well as sensitive technologies. Finally, the most scandalous cases are connected with the "Russian plutonium" detained in Germany.

Most experts in Minsk concluded that "although it is early to speak

about the country where the plutonium detained in Germany comes from, the Russian trail cannot be considered as proved." Moreover, economic and political interests are surely behind the rising rumors about "nuclear contraband." Whose interests those are is still unknown.

It cannot be completely denied that in Germany "the fantastic stories relating to plutonium were provoked by politicians overheated by the election campaign and making their career on rumors." At least that is the claim in an interview with Gennady Yevstafyev, one of the leaders of the Foreign Intelligence Service of Russia, the text of which was circulated at the conference. The interview in full will be published in the first issue of the new magazine "Yaderny Kontrol" (Nuclear Control) — the publication of the Center for Political Research in Russia, the co-founder of which is also *Moscow News*.

In all likelihood there are no serious reasons to speak of the existence of a "nuclear mafia" in Russia. There probably are individuals — non-professionals — who risk their health without knowing the world prices, nor even the potential buyers.

Judging by the reports of the conference delegates, registration and control of nuclear materials in Russia has not yet been properly organized. Especially acute is the problem of storing nuclear fuel for atomic submarines in the Northern Fleet. The hearings for a criminal case on stealing nuclear fuel have just ended in Severomorsk, already the second such case. Neither has communication been arranged between Russia and other countries of the ex-USSR on preventing likely leaks of nuclear materials.

The conference delegates also paid attention to information on the con-

frontation between two Russian Vice-Premiers, Oleg Soskovets and Alexander Shokhin, on the question of who will supervise control over "sensitive" exports. Until recently this job was Shokhin's, to whom the department for export control of the Ministry for Economics was subordinated. In September Soskovets became the curator, under the auspices of the new Federal service for hard currency and export control. According to Alexander Pikayev from the Institute of World Economics and International Relations, "sometimes it seems that Mr. Soskovets interprets export control as a regrettable hindrance towards the expansion of exports." Western participants in the conference could not understand how an official supervising military exports can also be responsible for exports control.

Participants in the conference were seriously concerned about the possibility for a number of military programs to be reanimated in Russia. Today about 15 countries possess limited stocks of biological weapons. It is quite likely that Russia prefers to be overcautious and not to relinquish its previous programs which, despite the promises of Boris Yeltsin, were not declassified.

Russia is also unlikely to ratify in the near future the convention on the general prohibition of chemical weapons. In part, the parliament has no time for it and in part — and this is a more likely explanation — Russia has no money today for complete chemical disarmament.

One of the positive moments stressed in Minsk is Russia's consistent stand regarding the need for the prolongation of the treaty on nuclear non-proliferation "permanently and unconditionally."

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