
Defense Report

AUSA



Chemical Warfare — We Can't Dodge the Issue Forever

Recent reports that the Soviet invaders of Afghanistan have used chemical warfare agents against isolated pockets of Moslem insurgents serve to remind us that the Soviet Union does not share the aversion of the rest of the civilized world to the use of these weapons. Soviet tactical doctrine dictates the use of nerve agents or other anti-personnel chemicals whenever they could make the difference between success and failure in an attack. Authority to use the agents is delegated down to the tactical commander. The Soviet Army has more than 90,000 soldiers whose primary duty is to be ready to conduct chemical attacks and to clean up after them.

In the face of all these realities, the United States Army, which is responsible to provide chemical warfare support for all the military services, has been trying for several years to get authority and funding for a new type of chemical munition. Called *binary* weapons, they are composed of non-toxic elements that are not combined into their toxic form until just before the artillery shell or aircraft bomb is exploded over the target. The Army plan is to replace the current stock of aging, leaking nerve gas weapons with binary devices so our ability to retaliate against a Soviet first use of chemical warfare is both reliable and safe.

What the Army needs from the national leadership is a decision to build a facility to produce binary weapons fast enough to replace the existing retaliatory stock of bombs and artillery shells before that stockpile becomes ineffective. Their chemical and explosive components are deteriorating and that, in turn, causes them to leak deadly chemicals. "Leakers" are destroyed as soon as possible but are not being replaced, so the stockpile continually shrinks.

The Army's request for funds to build the production facilities has gone forward to the Department of Defense several times only to be turned back on the basis of insufficient funds or the more honest position that Congress and the public probably would react negatively to the program. But this year the request for binary production funding in the proposed Fiscal Year 1981 budget was approved by the Defense Department as it began taking more realistic stock of our ability to defend our national interests. The request even made its way through the Office of Management and Budget and got to the White House. Unfortunately, it died there, not at the hand of the President himself but at that of one of his most senior advisors. The issue is dead for another year unless the Congress is persuaded to put the funds back in the budget.

Our innate abhorrence to chemical warfare is, at the same time, both admirable and foolish. We must face this problem realistically. Unless we do have a believable chemical retaliatory capability we are encouraging the use of those weapons against us.