

Russian Chemical Weapons Destruction Plant Opens

JIM HEINTZ Associated Press Writer - May 29, 2009

SHCHUCHYE, Russia (AP) — Rising out of the rolling fields and tree-lined country roads of southern Siberia is a complex of hulking metal buildings, piping and high-security fencing.

Its purpose? To cope with one of the nastiest legacies of the Cold War.

On Friday, Russian and American officials formally dedicated the high-tech plant, built with the help of \$1 billion from the U.S. and designed to destroy about 2 million chemical weapons shells.

The opening was a major step toward disposing of Russia's huge stockpile of Soviet-era chemical weapons, and a rare example of cooperation between two nations that still don't quite trust one another two decades after the Soviet collapse.

The 25-structure complex, the size of a small town, was largely funded by the U.S. under a program called the Cooperative Threat Reduction initiative, launched a year after the Soviet collapse. It is meant to help Russia cope with its vast Cold War arsenal of weapons of mass destruction.

U.S. Sen. Richard Lugar, an Indiana Republican who helped author much of the legislation that set up the program, came to the plains of Siberia Friday to speak at the dedication of the building, the program's largest single project.

"The path to peace and prosperity for both Russia and the United States depends on how we resolve the threats posed by the arsenals built to fight World War III," Lugar said. "Thankfully that confrontation never came. But today we must ensure that the weapons are never used, and never fall into the hands of those who would do harm to us or others."

Red, white and blue balloons were tied to the buildings, and a two-story-high photograph of President Dmitry Medvedev hung on the wall of one of them. Medvedev did not attend.

In his speech, Lugar referred in passing to recent tensions between Moscow and Washington, which peaked during last year's brief war between Russia and the former Soviet nation of Georgia, a U.S. ally.

"The United States and Russia have too much at stake and too many common interests to allow our relationship to drift toward conflict. Both of our nations have

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been the victim of terrorism that has deeply influenced our sense of security," he said.

The weapons at Shchuchye, loaded with nerve gases including VX and sarin, have a cataclysmic potential for terrorist attacks. If set off in a tightly packed area, each could kill tens of thousands of people. Many of them are small enough to fit in a briefcase.

Russia, as a signatory of the international Chemical Weapons Convention, is obliged to eliminate its vast stores of Class I weapons — chemicals that have no use other than in arms. Moscow already has destroyed about 30 percent of its stockpile, according to the Russian Munitions Agency.

"In this context, Shchuchye is the most important facility allowing us to fulfill this task," said Viktor Khristenko, the Russian minister of industry.

But the Shchuchye facility significantly boosts destruction capacity. Russian officials claim it will allow the country to meet its treaty obligations of destroying all chemical weapons by 2012, although Lugar said that goal probably won't be met.

Nonetheless, the opening — which follows preliminary destruction work that began in March — is significant because of the dangers posed by the weapons. Lugar said some of the shells at Shchuchye could kill 80,000 people if deployed in a stadium.

The opening of the plant comes at a symbolically important time, as Russia and the U.S. try to agree on a replacement to the START nuclear arms reduction treaty that expires at the end of this year. It also comes as both countries tentatively try to repair relations that have deteriorated in recent years.

The project stands as a model of long-term cooperation, but underlines the frequent difficulties that Washington runs into with Moscow.

Delays in opening the plant came as disagreements arose over the type of munitions to be destroyed and how to eliminate them. The U.S. General Accounting Office says the hunt for a Russian subcontractor to install equipment at a reasonable cost was alone responsible for pushing the project back a year.

The weapons to be destroyed at Shchuchye contain in total about 6,000 tons (5,460 metric tons) of nerve agent including sarin and VX; in all, that's about 14 percent of the chemical weapons that Russia is committed to destroy.

The initial destruction capacity is roughly 935 tons (850 metric tons) a year, but the figure is expected to double when a second building at the complex comes into operation at the end of the year.

The welded shells are to be drilled, then drained of their deadly agents. The chemicals will be neutralized then turned into bitumen salt mass, a solid waste that is considered mildly dangerous. That waste is to be stored in drums in concrete-lined bunkers situated above the groundwater level.

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The complex, which sprawls across some 250 acres (100 hectares) is about 10 miles (16 kilometers) from the buildings where the shells are stored. The weapons will be transported there on a specially built railroad.

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