

# Moscow's Chemical Weapons Coverup

By J. MICHAEL WALLER

A criminal investigation of a Russian general accused of smuggling chemical weapons components to a terrorist state is raising tough new questions for the Clinton administration. Retired Lt. Gen. Anatoly Kuntsevich was a top negotiator at the Chemical Weapons Convention and headed Russia's chemical and biological weapons conversion programs. He was also chairman of President Boris Yeltsin's committee on safeguarding and dismantling chemical and biological weapons when he allegedly smuggled 1,800 pounds of nerve gas components to an unidentified Middle Eastern country—believed to be Syria—in 1993. Russian security services also allege that he conspired to sell another five metric tons of chemical weapons components in early 1994.

Yeltsin had fired Gen. Kuntsevich in April of that year for having committed "numerous and gross violations" of duty. Public impression was that the violations were the coverup of Russia's ongoing clandestine chemical and biological warfare programs, of which Gen. Kuntsevich had been a leader just two years before. Now the U.S. Congress wants to know if the Clinton administration might have known about the apparent real reason for Gen. Kuntsevich's abrupt dismissal, yet kept Congress in the dark while it lobbied for ratification of the CWC.

Moscow's coverup of the secret programs continues. The public learned of Gen. Kuntsevich's alleged activities only by accident, when the chief of the Central Electoral Commission announced in October that a number of candidates running for the new State Duma were under criminal investigation. Gen. Kuntsevich was seeking a parliamentary seat as a member of the Liberal Democratic Party, led by ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. Apparently tipped off, the party dropped Gen. Kuntsevich from its list days before the official announcement of the probe.

Gen. Kuntsevich denies the allegations against him, calling them an attempt by former members of the KGB to undermine his attempts to cooperate with the West. However, as the one official whom American chemical weapons negotiators kept singling out as their main roadblock against cooperation (not to mention as a member of Mr. Zhirinovskiy's fanatically anti-Western party), Gen. Kuntsevich seems to have

convinced few with his argument.

News of the criminal investigation could not have come at a worse time for the Clinton administration, which on the heels of a string of foreign policy "victories" is pressing the U.S. Senate to ratify the CWC and other arms control agreements. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jesse Helms (Republican, North Carolina) has been holding up the CWC, and for good reason: Not only is compliance unverifiable, but there are deepening concerns that Moscow—under Gen. Kuntsevich's direction—inserted loopholes into the treaty that would technically allow Russia to develop and even proliferate nerve gases and other chemical weapons.

The public would know little of Moscow's ongoing program were it not for VII Mirzayanov, a mild-mannered scientist from the depths of the Russian chemical weapons complex who in 1992 blew the whistle on a super-secret binary nerve gas called Novichok. Gen. Kuntsevich personally led the Novichok development, and was a major force behind getting Mr. Mirzayanov thrown into the KGB's notorious Lefortovo Prison in October and November of that year.

When the Clinton administration took office in early 1993, it had an excellent opportunity to uproot the Novichok project and other clandestine programs by seeking out Mr. Mirzayanov, thus holding the Russians accountable and leveraging aid accordingly. Instead, the administration reached out to Gen. Kuntsevich—coming close to giving him a \$30 million "conversion" laboratory that Mr. Mirzayanov had warned would be used to continue nerve gas research—and pointedly failed to contact the dissident scientist. Writing in October 1993 to Strobe Talbott, the architect of the administration's Russia policy, Senator Bill Bradley (Democrat, New Jersey) said that Mr. Mirzayanov's revelations "have important implications for Russia's adherence to its chemical weapons commitments," and advised the administration to "follow up on information Mirzayanov has provided."

However, when I interviewed Mr. Mirzayanov in Moscow just a week after Gen. Kuntsevich had been fired in April 1994, he said that no one from the U.S. government had expressed interest in seeing him. "The top of the chemical weapons complex is morally ready" to sell their weapons of mass destruction to terrorist regimes, he warned at the time. "I am quite sure that no scientist will really do it, but the top officials may—they may have already. I know their mentality." He said that it was more imperative to control the leaders of the chemical weapons complex than it was to control the weapons themselves, and he singled out Gen. Kuntsevich in particular.

At the same time, Mr. Mirzayanov strongly opposed the CWC, partly because it did not ban research, and partly because he knew that Gen. Kuntsevich and other Russian CWC negotiators had inserted loopholes into the treaty language that would permit manufacture and export of nerve agents like Novichok. In his words, Kuntsevich and company had "rigged the CWC language to continue the chemical arms race."

Few in Washington heeded Mr. Mirzayanov's words at the time. But now Sen. Helms and others say that the criminal investigation of Gen. Kuntsevich casts the CWC in a whole new light, beyond verification problems to the possible Swiss cheese nature of the treaty itself.

In an Oct. 25 letter to President Clinton, Sen. Helms noted Gen. Kuntsevich's pivotal

role in manufacturing and limiting Russian chemical weapons.

"As Deputy Commander of the Soviet Chemical Forces," Sen. Helms wrote, "the [Kuntsevich] was honored as a hero of Socialist Labor in 1981. In 1988, he became a member of the Soviet delegation to the United Nations Conference on Disarmament, which negotiated the CWC. In 1991, he received the Lenin Prize for his work on binary chemical weapons. Through his many years as a negotiator for the Soviet/Russian governments, Gen. Kuntsevich won a number of concessions on the Chemical Weapons Convention and follow-on provisions to the Bilateral Destruction Agreement. Moreover, he was responsible for Russia's dubious declarations under the Wyoming Memorandum of Understanding."

"While General Kuntsevich is said to have been removed by President Yeltsin in April 1994, concern remains that the General may have conspired to negotiate significant loopholes in the agreements with the obvious intent of enabling him and others to engage in chemical weapons trafficking with impunity—and possibly to permit Russia to evade its obligations."

Sen. Helms requested "a thorough analysis of the negotiating record of the CWC and the Bilateral Destruction Agreement in order to review the role of General Kuntsevich in securing various provisions and concessions."

Noting the year and a half since the firing and subsequent criminal investigation, Sen. Helms posed an uncomfortable question for Clinton himself about Gen. Kuntsevich: "Were you aware of his activities, and his arrest, while you were urging the Congress to move forward on ratification of the CWC?" If President Clinton answers "yes," it would be further evidence that he has been duplicitous with Congress on arms control. If not, it would underscore the administration's incompetent handling of America's vital national security interests.

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