

# Trials of a New Russian Dissident

By J. MICHAEL WALLER

Twelve months after Moscow signed the Chemical Weapons Convention in Paris, the Russian government has jailed a scientist who revealed the existence of a clandestine program to deploy the most lethal chemical weapon ever developed.

His trial will be the first test of Russia's judicial system under its new constitution. But it is also a test of whether Moscow intends to honor its commitments to share information on chemical weapons programs and the elimination of most of its poison gas arsenal.

The defendant, Vil Mirzayanov, is one of a new group of dissident scientists emerging from Russia's sprawling military-industrial complex. In September 1992, he and colleague Lev Fedorov in an article in Moscow News told of a binary chemical weapon called Novichok, a poison five to 10 times as lethal as the VX gas currently in world arsenals.

Mr. Mirzayanov says he helped develop the toxin until his conscience made him stop. But in going public, he touched a sensitive nerve: Despite Moscow's commitments to eliminate the bulk of its arsenals and open its facilities to inspection, its biological and chemical weapons programs remain shrouded in secrecy.

## No International Observers

Mr. Mirzayanov's prosecution began before the new constitution's official adoption in December. But the trial is taking place now with little regard for the rights that document promised. The original trial date of Jan. 6 was changed apparently to avoid disrupting the Clinton-Yeltsin summit. When the trial opened Jan. 24, the court denied all defense motions, including requests to have independent experts testify on the scientist's behalf, and to permit international observers to attend.

Mr. Mirzayanov maintains that the trial violates Statute 20 of the criminal code, which gives the accused the right to be subject to a "thorough, full and objective investigation." The prosecution's "investigation" was nothing of the sort. It was carried out by the Ministry of Security—the renamed internal security section of the former KGB—which witnesses say has distorted their statements. One such witness is Baltimore Sun reporter Will Englund, who covered Mr. Mirzayanov's plight from the beginning and was held and interrogated by the KGB in April without being given the right to have a lawyer or U.S. Embassy official present.

Mr. Mirzayanov also argues that his prosecution violates Russia's new constitution, which states that any law, act or decree enters into force only after it has been published. The scientist is being tried under five government acts, all unpublished. One was a March 30, 1993, edict by Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin that made Mr. Mirzayanov's statements

a crime six months after the fact.

In a letter to the three-judge panel trying his case, Mr. Mirzayanov wrote "the only possible option for me is not to participate in this criminal event. Therefore I am informing you that from this point on, I will not appear in the court proceedings." He boycotted the second day of the trial and was arrested and imprisoned until a new trial set to begin this week.

If Mr. Mirzayanov is convicted, the government is likely to prosecute other dissident scientists as well. One is Vladimir Uglev, one of Russia's top designers of bi-

---

*Vil Mirzayanov says he helped develop the chemical weapon Novichok until his conscience made him stop. But in going public, he touched a sensitive nerve.*

---

nary weapons and an inventor of key compounds in Novichok at a clandestine laboratory in Shikhany. After Russia signed the Chemical Weapons Convention, he wrote an article describing 15 years of development of hundreds of deadly chemical agents and confirmed Mr. Mirzayanov's story. He was fired and investigated by the former KGB.

Moscow's behavior in trying to quash exposure of Novichok has many parallels to Soviet attempts to cover up the 1979 "anthrax" disaster in Sverdlovsk, where an accident at a secret biological weapons lab killed 64 people. Just as Sverdlovsk was a "closed city" through the Soviet period, the main site of Russian chemical weapons production, Shikhany, remains closed to foreigners to this day.

The disregard for public safety is also similar. According to a statement from Andrei Zheleznyakov, a scientist who also worked on Novichok, a Moscow lab knowingly released toxins into the air through a filter officials knew was faulty. Mr. Uglev alleges that there have been mysterious outbreaks of disease in the Volsk region around Shikhany and that secrecy "is an obstacle to finding out the causes."

Victims and doctors were silenced in both cases. When Mr. Zheleznyakov was hospitalized after being exposed to a Novichok strain in a 1987 lab accident, the KGB instructed doctors to sign a secrecy pledge. A dying Mr. Zheleznyakov was given a disability pension in exchange for his silence. As in the Sverdlovsk case, where authorities used "tainted meat" as an excuse to explain the "anthrax" outbreak, the KGB told doctors that Mr. Zheleznyakov was suffering from the ef-

fects of spoiled sausage. And just as the three-judge panel has refused to admit independent testimony in the Novichok case, so it was in the early Sverdlovsk probe.

In each case, scientists were forced to remain silent or were harassed for having spoken out. No one with knowledge of the "anthrax" incident dared talk to journalists for more than a decade. Messrs. Mirzayanov and Uglev were fired from their jobs, while their silent colleagues remain on the payroll.

Journalists and their sources were harassed in both instances. The sources of the first Russian reporter to probe the Sverdlovsk incident 11 years after the fact were subjected to official harassment. Moscow News, Izvestia and Novoye Vremya, which covered the Novichok story, also received visits from the former KGB.

Why are the Russians so upset with Mr. Mirzayanov? He is alleged to have revealed "results of an entire program of secret weaponry." And acknowledgement of a secret weapon not only would force Russia to place Novichok under the Chemical Weapons Convention and thus scuttle the program, but would also jeopardize hundreds of millions of dollars in American and other Western aid.

## Chemical Generals

The dissident scientists are unanimous that the "chemical generals" cannot be trusted to dismantle the nerve gas development and production facilities, or even to destroy existing stocks. The scientists have a well-founded fear of the generals' historical disregard for public safety. Mr. Uglev is also concerned that corrupt officers will sell the Novichok formula to terrorist states and organizations. Once the formula and process are known, he says, Novichok is easy to produce with commercially available chemicals.

Mr. Mirzayanov has alleged that Western money earmarked for chemical weapons destruction will be counterproductive. He said in an interview published in Moscow News: "Our generals raised an outcry alleging that Russia would not manage to destroy its chemical weapons unaided and that we need at least \$600 million. They want to get that sum, through Yeltsin, from the USA." The point, he adds, is "to finance the destruction of obsolescent stocks and to carry on the development of binary weapons."

Mr. Zheleznyakov agreed. Before he died last summer, he told Novoye Vremya: "The generals cannot be trusted with the destruction of chemical weapons. The money received from the Americans for this purpose will definitely be channeled into the development of new and more powerful toxic substances."

---

*Mr. Waller is director of international security affairs at the International Freedom Foundation in Washington.*