

THE WORLD

Stopping the proliferation of chemical weapons

USSR, 50 other nations are close to agreement in Geneva on a proposed US treaty that is a high priority of George Bush

By Matthew S. Meselson

With international concern about chemical weapons heightened last week by the suspect facility in Libya, the best hope for preventing poison-gas warfare and for reversing the ominous proliferation of chemical weapons is a treaty now being negotiated at the Chemical Weapons Convention in Geneva. The convention would ban the manufacture, possession and transfer of chemical weapons, subject to on-site international verification.

The agreement taking shape in Geneva is based on a US-proposed treaty designed largely in the Pentagon and presented at Geneva in 1984 by Vice President George Bush. At the time, the Soviets, and even some of our allies, were unwilling to accept the tough verification measures called for in the US draft. But with the changing attitude of the Soviets under Mikhail Gorbachev, the US position has won out. Although important issues remain to be resolved, the United States, the Soviet Union and most of the other 50 nations represented in the Geneva negotiations now agree on the basic provisions of the emerging treaty.

Terms of proposed treaty

States party to the Chemical Weapons Convention would be required to declare their stocks of chemical weapons and their chemical-weapons production facilities. These would subsequently be destroyed according to a strict schedule.

The declarations would be verified, and destruction would be monitored on-site by a permanent international authority set up to administer the treaty and to ensure compliance. The chemical industries in each nation would be monitored by an array of measures, ranging from obligatory data reporting to on-site inspection.

Beyond these routine verification measures, the convention would provide for immediate on-site inspection of suspicious activities, with no right of refusal by the suspected state. If such a challenge inspection were to find, for example, that a multi-use chemical factory is producing or has produced prohibited mustard gas, the entire facility would have to be destroyed under international surveillance. When first proposed by the United States in 1984, challenge inspection seemed politically unrealistic. Five years later, with the example of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty already behind us and Soviet and American nuclear inspectors now stationed at each other's missile factories, intrusive arms-control verification measures are emerging from the ivory tower into the realm of practical international politics.

A problem in designing effective verification measures for the chemical treaty has been the protection of trade secrets and the avoidance of cumbersome controls that would impede normal business activities. Wisely, the US government invited input from the chemical industry at an early stage. In response, the US Chemical Manufacturers Association, representing more than 90 percent of the chemical-production capacity of the Unit-

ed States, created a working group to help design effective verification measures while still protecting the interests of industry. In October 1987, the association's board of directors officially declared its support for a treaty to ban chemical weapons. The chemical industries of many nations have now joined the effort and, in an ongoing series of international meetings, are seeking to develop acceptable monitoring procedures. Even before conclusion of a formal treaty, such monitoring procedures could determine whether the suspect facility in Libya is making chemical weapons.

Penalties would be harsh

Another problem under discussion in Geneva is that of persuading nations in the world's hot spots, especially the Middle East, to join in. Egypt has been an active member of the negotiating group in Geneva. But special efforts will be required to ensure the participation of states in this region. The incentives for joining the convention and the penalties for staying out would be considerable. For

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nations reluctant to give up their chemical option because of fears that neighboring states will not do likewise, the convention provides a way to coordinate mutual renunciation under international verification. The incentive would be enhanced security. If renegade nations persist in maintaining chemical arms, there will be a legal framework and widespread international support for economic and political sanctions.

Completion of the chemical treaty requires that it be given high priority by the

leaders of the principal nations involved in its drafting. President-elect Bush enters office with long familiarity with the issues and a strong commitment to success. His repeated statements on the issue have created the expectation that the United States will provide a powerful impetus for the abolition of chemical weapons. In his major prepared address on foreign policy in October, for example, Bush stated, "And if I'm elected president, if I'm remembered for anything, it would be this: a complete and total ban on chemical weapons. Their destruction forever. That's my solemn mission."

Today, there is no international law against the production or possession of poison-gas weapons. There is only the no-first-use agreement embodied in the Geneva Protocol of 1925, which prohibits the actual use but not the manufacture or stockpiling of such arms. The protocol was a response to the massive use of gas in World War I. Although gas was not highly effective as a weapon, owing to the rapid battlefield introduction of gas masks and other protective measures, its use inspired a particularly intense horror and revulsion. And, in those days before nuclear weapons, there was apprehension that in future wars gas would be used deliberately against civilians, spread over whole cities by aircraft. Fortunately, this has not happened, and gas has been used in only a handful of the 200-odd wars that have been fought since World War I. But worldwide concern about poison gas has been fueled again by Iraq's massive use of mustard gas and by apparent chemical weapons preparations in Libya and elsewhere. This renewed concern, together with support for a treaty by the major powers and by the chemical industry, enhances the prospects for an effective international ban on chemical weapons.

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