Approval Seen for New U.S. Chemical Weapons

A NATO committee is expected to provide a key endorsement for the production of binary weapons; European opponents say the issue has not been given broad enough political debate

Paris

EUROPEAN countries are poised to provide the Reagan Administration with a key endorsement that will permit the United States to produce new chemical weapons for the first time in 16 years. Congress stipulated in legislation passed last December that such an endorsement is required before the Department of Defense (DOD) can begin production of binary chemical weapons.

A regular meeting of permanent representatives to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, planned to be held in Brussels on 28 April, is expected to approve a "force goal" submitted by the United States which includes plans for the production of 155-mm nerve gas shells and Bigeye bombs. The fact that this approval will come from government officials rather than elected representatives is creating considerable controversy in Europe.

Nevertheless, the relatively low level of public opposition that has so far been expressed to the U.S. plans reflects the success of what is seen in Europe as a deliberate strategy by DOD to play down the chemical weapons issue and keep discussion at a restricted level.

For example, Thomas J. Welch, deputy assistant to the secretary of defense for chemical matters and formerly deputy director for doctrine at the U.S. Army Chemical School, told a congressional committee earlier this year that "we must try to avoid a politicized debate in European Parliaments."

Potential opposition from Europe to the eventual deployment of a new generation of weapons—particularly in Britain and West Germany, where long memories remain of their use in World War I—has been one of the factors that led Congress to reject successive Administration demands for restarting production between 1981 and 1984.

Last June, in approving the request for the first time, the House of Representatives added an amendment to the DOD fiscal year 1986 authorization bill, authored by Representative Ike Skelton (D–MO), stipulating that production of the 155-mm shells and the Bigeye bombs could only begin when European nations where these were likely to be stored and deployed had shown that they were willing to accept them.

At the time, this condition was warmly welcomed in Europe. The *Economist*, for example, wrote in an editorial generally supportive of the need for new chemical weapons that it was "important that Europeans think the nerve gas issue through." The editorial said this was important to avoid another row like the one over neutron weapons in 1977.

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Substantial changes in the House's wording were subsequently made in the conference report agreed to by both legislative bodies on 13 December last year, however. As far as deployment is concerned, the final language in the authorization bill merely states that a deployment plan must be developed in co-ordination with NATO's military commanders and after the President "has consulted with" other member nations of NATO.

The main dispute in Europe is currently focused on a second condition attached to the appropriations bill by Congress. This states that, before production can begin, President Reagan must certify that the United States has submitted to NATO a force goal—the words used to describe an individual country's weapons plans—setting out its proposals for the "modernization of the U.S. proportional share of the NATO chemical deterrent with binary munitions," and that this force goal "has been formally adopted by the North Atlantic Council."

One problem with this language, as many Europeans see it, is that a "NATO chemical deterrent" does not currently exist. The only NATO country currently holding chemical weapons is the United States, and these are supposed to be used only in response to a Soviet attack. (France has some too, but it is not a member of NATO's military structure.)

"We do not regard chemical weapons, as the United States seems to, as a NATO deterrent," says Uwe Stehr, a research worker with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Bonn. "There is no chemical leg in NATO's current deterrence strategy; we regard chemical weapons as a means of retaliation held by one member country."

In this context, any acceptance of the phrase "the NATO chemical deterrent" is seen as having the important political implication of endorsing the idea that the members of the NATO alliance should jointly rearm themselves with chemical weapons, even though some, such as West Germany, have already proscribed them.

The major point of conflict, however, is over the stipulation that the President must also certify that the force goal put forward by the United States has been adopted by the North Atlantic Council. Since the council is made up of the defense and foreign ministers of the 16 NATO member states, some have taken this to indicate that Congress wants to see a broad political endorsement by the United States' European allies of its plans to resume the production of chemical weapons and thus, to quote one commentator, a "European lock on the program."

However, David M. Abshire, the U.S. permanent representative to NATO, told the Senate Armed Services Committee's subcommittee on strategic and theater nuclear forces on 10 April that, under revised NATO procedures, adoption of the proposed U.S. force goal by the organization's Defense Planning Committee—which is made up of the permanent representatives in Brussels—should be sufficient to meet the intent of the legislation. Abshire said that the North Atlantic Council need only "take note" of the committee's decision. The council is scheduled to meet in late May.

Under normal circumstances, all force goals approved by the Defense Planning Committee are accepted without question by the North Atlantic Council. Indeed, most major NATO countries are expected to give their approval to the U.S. plans. "If we did feel very strongly about the issue, I suppose we would raise an objection when the report [from the NATO committee] came to the ministers, but as it is we do not feel that way," says a member of the British delegation to NATO in Brussels. "Our general position is that we would like a complete ban on chemical weapons, and have been

working hard to achieve this in the chemical disarmament talks in Geneva. But we have no illusions about how difficult that is going to be, and a U.S. decision to develop and produce new chemical weapons might provide a new incentive to an agreement."

Abshire's statement that the ministers need merely take note of the NATO committee's decision is seen by some as a deliberate effort to bypass political debate in Europe. U.S. officials in NATO point out, however, that the wording of the congressional resolution says the force goal only needs to be "adopted," not "approved" by the council.

"Chemical rearmament in Europe is not a light issue, it is something that should be fully debated before the important decisions are taken," says Julian Perry-Robinson, a specialist in chemical weapons policy at Sussex University's Science Policy Research Unit in Britain. "This procedure seems to be designed to avoid that process; indeed, one might conclude that the intent of Congress [for a full European debate] is not being followed."

Realizing the imminence of the decision, parliamentary opposition parties in several European countries, as well as religious and peace groups, are hurriedly trying to mount a last minute campaign designed to prevent the NATO ministers from endorsing the U.S. force goal at their May meeting.

In Bonn, for example, the SPD, backed by the Greens, has tabled a motion requesting an emergency debate in the Federal Parliament, the Bundestag. A similar motion claiming that "if U.S. production is approved there will be a new arms race in chemical and biological weaponry" is expected to be approved by the Socialist Group in the European Parliament at the beginning of next month.

Britain's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament is circulating a briefing document to all members of the British Parliament. And wide publicity was given in the Dutch press last weekend to a press conference condemning the U.S. proposals held by one of Holland's leading antinuclear activists, Mient Jan Farber, the head of the Interkerkelijk Vredesbaard (Interchurch Council).

Some of these opponents are predicting that their case will be boosted by the backlash in Europe against last week's attack by the United States on Libya. "I can imagine some NATO ministers wanting to find a way of expressing their criticism of the American action," says one member of the European Parliament.

Others say they detect a sudden increase in public interest sparked by press reports of the decisions in Brussels. "Up to a few weeks ago, there was little reaction, since people felt the chemical weapons issue had been resolved long ago, but that is now changing rapidly," says one Dutch peace activist.

Many opponents of chemical weapons, however, feel that they have been outflanked by the low-key way in which the decision-making process has been kept within NATO. "We are trying to get a debate going as urgently as possible, but we fear that the discussion has started too late," says Stehr of the German SPD. ■

DAVID DICKSON

Binary Deployment Remains Controversial

To Europeans, one of the major attractions of binary chemical weapons is that they need not—and supposedly will not—be stored in Europe. Following loading and assembly at a facility in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, the munitions are to be transported only to depots elsewhere in the United States, according to the Defense Department. Meanwhile, aging munitions now stored at roughly six locations in West Germany will be detoxified and removed before 1995, as directed by Congress in legislation last year.

Thus, the program at first glance enables the European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to rid themselves of a politically odious stockpile, as well as make the United States shoulder the economic and political burden of renewed production. This is one reason why an indirect approval for the binaries seems to be moving easily through a subcommittee of the North Atlantic Council (see accompanying story). The only drawback is that the United States could eventually change its mind and put the new weapons in Europe, even without the approval of local governments.

The reason is that no formal agreement exists within NATO on the deployment and use of chemical weapons, as General Frederick Kroesen, a former commander in chief of the U.S. Army in Europe, acknowledged in testimony last year before the House Armed Services Committee. Asked if the binaries might one day be shared with or used by U.S. allies, Kroesen—who recently directed a special chemical weapons study for the Reagan Administration—said, "I do not think we have a policy, sir, at this time."

An official at NATO headquarters in Belgium confirms this statement and notes that the situation contrasts sharply with that involving nuclear weapons, which are subject to a detailed, classified NATO operational agreement. "The European governments would simply prefer not to discuss the chemical issue, for fear of igniting an enormous public controversy," the official says. As a result, responsibility for decision-making on the binaries rests entirely with the United States.

Early last year, the Pentagon provided mixed signals about the degree to which European governments would be consulted prior to overseas deployment of binary weapons. General Charles Donnelly, Jr., for example, the commander in chief of U.S. Air Forces in Europe, said that "it would be an individual political decision by each sovereign nation as to whether they would permit it or not." But Kroesen, appearing at the same hearing, stated flatly that the binaries could potentially be substituted for existing munitions without consent. "I think we have just as much right to do that as we had to exchange tank ammunition when we developed the new type of tank ammunition," he said.

Subsequently, Congress required in legislation that the Pentagon formulate a deployment contingency plan and obtain NATO advice. But the final decisions, on both deployment and use, will clearly be made by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff or by the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR), U.S. General Bernard Rogers. As Donnelly acknowledged, "[the] SACEUR, I am sure, having been given the authority to use offensive chemical weapons, would use them in areas where he needed them. . . . They would be used wherever needed, I am confident."

Mindful of European sensitivities on the subject, Richard Ziegler, the chief Pentagon spokesman on chemical matters, emphasizes that "there is no need and there are no plans to place the binaries in Europe, as of right now." But he adds that "I have learned, from long experience, not to predict what the decision will be in the future." ■ R. JEFFREY SMITH