

France Expels Soviets for Spying on Ariane

Six diplomats were expelled after seven people were arrested for allegedly spying on high-tech industry in northern France

THE French government has indirectly accused the Soviet Union of spying on research into the development of new cryogenic engines for the launcher Ariane, a move that could cast a shadow over what has up to now been a close collaboration between the two countries in space technology.

On 2 April, France announced that it was expelling three diplomats from the Soviet Embassy in Paris, charging that they had been engaged in "activities unconnected to their mission and their station." Three days later, Moscow announced that it was expelling six diplomats from the French embassy in Moscow, including the first secretary and a military attaché, stating that this was the same number that had been required to leave France. The French government apparently sought to limit the diplomatic fallout by announcing only three expulsions, but it subsequently admitted to the higher number.

The expulsions came 3 weeks after seven people, including one woman from Romania and another from the Soviet Union, were arrested in the northern French town of Rouen and subsequently charged with conspiring to steal state secrets and pass them on to a "foreign power."

Four years ago, the French government expelled 47 Soviet diplomats after allegations that they had been involved in a wide-ranging effort to glean the secrets of France's high technology in both civilian and military fields.

So far, no details have been released about the information that those arrested are alleged to have passed on to the Soviet Union, beyond the fact that one of the five men involved had recently been employed as a subcontractor on the test facilities of the engine-manufacturing company Société Européenne de Propulsion (SEP).

SEP is presently carrying out the final tests on modifications that have had to be made to the third stage of the current version of Ariane, which was responsible for the launcher's failure last July.

According to the French authorities, the alleged spy ring may also have been interest-

ed in work related to the development of a new cryogenic engine, known as HM60, which is being financed through the European Space Agency (ESA) and is eventually intended to power the heavy-duty version of the launcher, Ariane V, intended for its first flight in 1995.

The leader of the ring is claimed to be 36-year-old Pierre Verdier, a graduate from France's most prestigious higher education institution, the Ecole Polytechnique. He is said to have used his position as head of the Rouen branch of France's national statistics

The affair has come just when France and the European Space Agency are discussing cooperative space programs with the Soviets

agency to pass on confidential information about the activities of a range of high-technology companies in the area.

Although SEP has been the main focus of attention in the French press, the alleged spy ring may have been interested in other high-technology companies in the region, including Hispano Suiza, which produces components for the engines of the U.S. airborne warning and control system (AWACS) aircraft.

Some press reports, which the government has refused to confirm or deny, have claimed that the mastermind behind the whole operation was an assistant military attaché at the Soviet Embassy in Paris, Valeri Konorev.

Konorev is said to be a member of the Soviet military intelligence service GRU, whose carefully planned worldwide efforts at collecting technical information of potential interest to Soviet engineers have been closely mapped by the French secret service.

There have, indeed, been some reports that the decision to arrest the members of

the alleged spy ring was stimulated largely by a desire within one branch of the secret service, the Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire (DST), primarily as a way of requiring Konorev to leave France once his double activity was established soon after his arrival in 1985.

The Soviet Union itself has denied all involvement in the affair and pointed out that no proof has yet been made public that any of those arrested were actually involved in spying. A spokesman for the ministry of foreign affairs said in Moscow last week that the French decision to expel its diplomats would almost certainly have "negative effects" on diplomatic relationships between the two countries.

Konorev said in an interview with the Soviet news agency Tass that he had "never seen" any of the people with whom he was supposed to have been in contact, and that he had never been to the places in Normandy—including the area around the SEP facilities—where he allegedly had been in charge of the intelligence network.

The case has been given a further twist by the personal relationships between those involved. In particular, Verdier's father has claimed that his son had been denounced to the DST by a Romanian secretary at the statistics institute who became upset when Verdier, a fluent Russian speaker who had visited the Soviet Union several times, broke off their affair to become engaged to a Russian woman after a visit to Moscow.

So far, officials at both the French space agency, the Centre National d'Etudes Spatiales (CNES), and ESA have refused to comment on whether the spy affair is likely to have a major impact on their links with the Soviet Union.

However, it has come at a sensitive time, since both agencies are currently engaged in discussing cooperative space programs with the Soviets. For example, ESA has recently reached a draft agreement on a series of life science experiments that would be carried out on the Soviet space station, MIR, and France has been discussing participation in the Soviet Union's planetary science programs.

The affair has also come at an embarrassing time for Prime Minister Jacques Chirac, who is keen to keep negotiating channels open with the Soviet Union in order to give a high profile to France's position over the debate about eliminating medium-range missiles in Europe.

The head of CNES, however, Frédéric d'Allest, quickly made his views known. The day after the members of the alleged spy ring were arrested, he claimed that Eastern Bloc countries were responsible. ■

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