Hopes Recede for Early Ban on Chemical Arms

Although the United States and the Soviet Union have narrowed many of their differences, key issues remain unresolved and momentum has been lost

Geneva

THE diplomats from over 40 countries who have spent more than a decade drafting a ban on chemical weapons are facing a frustrating paradox. At a time when the main participants in the negotiations—namely the United States and the Soviet Union—appear closer than they have ever been on matters of principle, the prospect of rapid agreement on a global ban is receding before everyone's eyes.

Substantial progress has been made over the past year within the United Nations Conference on Disarmament both in sketching out details of a draft convention, and persuading the Soviet Union to accept a number of key Western proposals. Perhaps the most significant event was what one Western diplomat describes as a "cave-in" last August by the Soviet Union on the question of verification, when it agreed to accept the principle of short notice "challenge inspections," considered the keystone of any effective verification procedure.

But a variety of factors have combined to slow down negotiation in Geneva. Last year some delegates were talking optimistically about reaching agreement by the end of 1988, now the more realistic assessment is that completing the process could take another 2 to 3 years. Pessimists claim the negotiations could fall apart completely.

Some argue that the slowdown is primarily due to the fact that, even though agreement may have been reached on most of the outstanding issues of principle, the negotiators are now faced with a wide range of complex technical issues that will still take considerable time to resolve.

"An awareness of the missing elements has developed sharply," says the head of one European delegation. "We do not yet even have an agreed definition of a chemical weapon; similarly, although we define toxicity in terms of toxic to humans or animals, we have not yet defined which animals we mean."

Others, however, suggest more privately that technical complexities are being used partly as a smokescreen to hide the fact that several of the participants—the United States and France in particular—are reluctant to conclude a disarmament convention before they have had the opportunity to build up stocks of new chemical weapons.

"Some countries seem to be using relatively unimportant technical issues to indicate that they are not yet ready to agree at the political level," says Peter Herby, who has been tracking the negotiations for the Quaker United Nations Office.

Whichever explanation is accepted, there is a widespread feeling in Geneva that much of the impetus given to the chemical disarmament talks by President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail S. Gorbachev at their first summit meeting in 1985 has dissipated as the question of cuts in intermediate range—and more recently strategic—nuclear missiles have come to the front of the disarmament stage. "There has been some advance, but the progress has been very slow," says one member of the British delegation.

The negotiators are now faced with a wide range of complex technical issues that will still take considerable time to resolve.

Pessimism about the eventual outcome has been heightened by evidence of growing proliferation in the use of traditional chemical weapons (graphically highlighted by recent reports of the extensive use of mustard gas in the Iran-Iraq War), and also by decisions by both the United States and France to proceed with the production of new chemical munitions.

"Unless the disarmament conference gets a firmer grip on the subject matter and a stronger sense of momentum and purposefulness, then I fear it could all begin to unravel, without the fault being attributable to anyone in particular," says Nicholas Sims of the department of international relations at the London School of Economics. "If that happens, then the negotiations could drag on aimlessly, running into the sands, and be overtaken by a new proliferation of chemical weapons, both horizontal and vertical. It troubles me very much, and I do not think I am alone in that."

On the brighter side, negotiators in Geneva point to several areas in which agreement has been achieved over the past year. For example, substantial progress has been made in drawing up detailed lists of industrially used toxic chemicals, categorized according to their potential utility in weapons, whose production will need to be monitored to avoid diversion. Plans are also well advanced for the organization that will administer the monitoring requirements.

There has been increased—although still not total—openness on the part of the Soviet Union about its stocks of chemical weapons. In particular, Soviet officials announced in December that the current stockpile amounts to 50,000 tons of "toxic substances." This still contrasts sharply with the 300,000 tons usually given as the U.S. estimate of Soviet chemical weapons, but some argue that the discrepancy could be due to different systems of calculation.

Perhaps the most important breakthrough has come on the question of verification. Ever since Vice President George Bush put forward a draft treaty in 1984, the United States has insisted that all signatories to the convention accept the idea of mandatory "challenge inspections," giving inspectors access to a suspected chemical weapons facility at no more than 48 hours notice.

In the past, the Soviet Union has firmly rejected this proposal, arguing that it would give the United States and others an opportunity to spy on secret military installations. Last August, however, Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze announced unexpectedly that the Soviet Union was ready, in principle, to accept the idea that international inspectors should be given access on demand to suspect facilities.

Differences continue to exist on a number of points. One, for example, concerns the rules that should cover the production of laboratory-scale quantities of highly toxic chemicals with potential military applications. The Soviet Union is proposing that production of these should only be allowed at a single facility in each country.

The United States, in contrast, argues that there should be no restriction on the number of research laboratories allowed to produce such quantities, a view shared by many other Western delegations. U.S. officials argue both that a ban on the production of such small quantities would be impossible to

verify, and that restricting laboratory research would be an unnecessary infringement on the freedom of scientific inquiry.

A second area of dispute is the extent to which major chemical companies in both Europe and the United States will be prepared to accept the proposed monitoring procedures.

The Brussels-based European Confederation of Chemical Industry Associations (CEFIC), for example, stated in a recent letter to the conference that it found parts of the current draft of the convention "unacceptable."

Francesco Snichelotto of CEFIC says companies are worried about both the costs of some of the routine verification procedures being proposed and the possibility that some countries may deliberately try to use the convention to gain access to industrial and commercial secrets.

A third complicating factor is a French proposal, tabled last year, which would enable smaller countries (such as France) to build up what it calls "security stocks" of chemical weapons, even after the convention comes into force (see box).

Finally, even though many Third World countries, wary of the potential military strategies of their neighbors, are among the most keen to see the successful completion of a global convention, several have expressed concerns about the current draft. Some, such as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, argue that insufficient economic compensation is being proposed to cover the costs involved in observing the convention, while others, in particular China, still have strong reservations about the political implications of the challenge inspection procedures.

Many delegates and observers in Geneva are confident that such differences could be resolved relatively quickly if there was a new push from the U.S. administration to achieve a settlement. "There are no problems left that are too difficult to solve," says Herby of the Quakers' office.

"The U.S. seems to be in a holding position," says one European diplomat. He points, for example, to claims by the U.S. delegation, when pressed on why it has not responded more positively to recent concessions by the Soviet Union, that it lacks the appropriate instructions from Washington.

Two concerns are frequently expressed about the slow rate of progress. The first is that it reinforces a perception among some delegates that the United States may have chosen to spin out the negotiations partly under pressure from those in the Department of Defense who continue to insist that a global ban on chemical weapons could never be made acceptably verifiable.

The second concern is that regional agreements could undercut the chances of obtaining accord on a total ban. Already, for example, the United States and the Soviet Union are carrying on parallel bilateral talks within the framework of negotiations on reducing nonnuclear arms in Europe. And pressure is growing from opposition parties in West Germany—supported by various socialist bloc countries—for the creation of a "chemical-free zone" in Eastern Europe.

Keen to maintain the pressure for a global ban, West German Foreign Minister Hans Dietrich Genscher told the Disarmament Conference in February that regional solutions—for example, a ban confined to Europe—were "not desirable."

But some of the sense of urgency seems to have dissipated from other delegations. Two years ago, for example, British Minister of State Timothy Renton suggested that conference delegates should "set ourselves the goal of completing our work within the next year." Last month, in contrast, the new head of Britain's negotiating team, Teresa Solesby, told the conference that a good convention "requires a lot more work," adding that "I do not understand those who suggest that all we need is a final sprint to the finishing line."

Rolf Ekéus, head of the Swedish delegation, says that, as a result of recent progress, agreement on chemical disarmament "is no longer a distant goal, but a real possibility." At the same time, however, he admits to being worried that, with some countries now advocating "half-measures" (that is, regional bans) and others bringing in topics which could be dealt with at the implementation stage, "efforts to achieve a global convention could still collapse, and the prospects of this happening are increasing with the delay." ■ **David Dickson**

A French "Joker in the Pack"

Paris

The French government's decision to equip itself with a new stock of chemical weapons has, like the U.S. decision last year to proceed with the production of binary munitions, added a potential impediment to negotiations on a worldwide ban on chemical armaments.

Prime Minister Jacques Chirac has confirmed that France wishes to build up what he describes as a "minimum stock" of chemical weapons, generally believed to include both artillery shells and, eventually, air-launched rockets. The purpose, Chirac claims, is to avoid having to use nuclear weapons to respond to a chemical attack. Chirac was quoted in a French defense magazine, that "chemical weapons will make up, in the framework of our dissuasive strategy, an important stage marking our determination to reply in the appropriate way to all levels of attack."

Chirac added that France would be ready to destroy its stockpile in the event of a global ban. But the French government wants to produce chemical weapons even after a treaty has been signed, in order to build up "security stocks" of about 1000 to 2000 tons, which would be destroyed only in the last year of a 10-year destruction period.

Last year, France put forward a controversial proposal at the Geneva disarmament talks that would permit such a buildup by smaller countries while the United States and the Soviet Union begin to destroy their own stockpiles. French officials claim that this is necessary to counter the current imbalance in chemical weapons stocks, particularly in Europe.

Although there has been some support from other delegates for the basic concept of security stocks, allowing countries to produce chemical weapons—even temporarily—under a treaty intended to ban them seems to be unacceptable to almost all those engaged in the current negotiations.

Enrico Jacchia, head of the Center for Strategic Studies in Rome and an adviser to Italian Foreign Minister Giulio Andreotti, says that the immediate effect of the French proposal would be to encourage the proliferation of chemical weapons by setting an example for countries currently on the threshold of joining the "chemical club." As such, he adds, it "may compromise any chance of an agreement on a world chemical arms convention in the near future."

"If the French stick rigidly to their position, it could jeopardize the whole thing," says one diplomat involved in the Geneva negotiations, adding that any clause allowing continued production would be "completely counter to the proposed convention." Or, as another puts it succinctly: "France is now the joker in the pack." ■ **D.D.**