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Plant for Chemical Weapons Disposal Is Opened

By Nataliya Vasilyeva

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A television monitor showing chemical weapons being readied for destruction Friday at a new facility in Pochep. **Misha Japaridze**

POCHEP, Bryansk Region — Russia will miss a 2012 deadline for destroying all of its chemical weapons, officials said Friday as they inaugurated a major new plant to dispose of them.

The facility at Pochep, tucked between the Ukrainian and Belarussian borders 250 miles southwest of Moscow, is the latest of six plants built in Russia in recent years to dismantle its Cold War-era chemical weapons arsenals — the world's largest.

Pochep will process nearly 19 percent of Russia's stockpile, or 7,500 tons of nerve agent used in aircraft-delivered munitions.

The plant, hidden in a dense birch forest, is key for Russia's commitment to destroy all of its chemical weapons by April 2012 as the country deals with its vast arsenal of weapons of mass

destruction.

As a signatory to the international Chemical Weapons Convention, Russia has already destroyed about half of its chemical weapons, according to Russian officials.

Viktor Kholstov, the Industry and Trade Ministry official in charge of chemical disarmament, said at the plant's opening Friday that Russia will honor its commitment on disarmament but will need two or three more years beyond the previously announced deadline.

The delay had been caused by a shortage of funds in the last two years, he said. Government funding has been scarce, while international donors have provided only 60 percent of the expected funding.

The Foreign Ministry issued a similar warning in August, saying that, because of the global financial crisis, Russia ran into "financial and technical difficulties" that would stretch the time required for completing the disposal of chemical weapons stockpiles by up to three years.

The United States has acknowledged that it will miss the deadline, too. Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller said at the United Nations last month that the United States had destroyed 78 percent of its chemical weapons stockpiles and was on pace to destroy 90 percent of its arsenal by April 2012.

Colonel General Valery Kapashin, a military official in charge of storage and elimination of Russia's chemical stockpiles, said Pochep was expected to eliminate its stock of chemical weapons by the end of 2014.

The weapons processed at Pochep are loaded with nerve gas such as VX, sarin and soman, which can potentially become a lethal weapon if they fall into the hands of terrorists. The first five tons of VX was destroyed at Pochep on Friday.

The munitions are transported from a nearby arsenal to the plant where they are drilled into. A fuel neutralizing their deadly agent is then added. The munitions will spend three months in underground storage before they are burned in special stoves at the same plant.

"The destruction of these weapons eliminates a potential threat to the public and environment," Kholstov said, describing chemical weapons disarmament as a priority in Russia's foreign and domestic policy.

Unlike other plants where foreign financing was sizable, the Pochep facility was built mainly on government money but with small contributions from Germany and Switzerland.

Switzerland has allocated 14.5 million Swiss francs ($14.5 million) for Russian disarmament projects, said Stefan Esterman, a minister in Switzerland's Russian Embassy. He could not provide a specific figure for the Pochep facility.

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