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Tons of Ticking Time Bombs

By Alexander Golts

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It seems that Russia has invented a new way of getting rid of old, dangerous ammunition: blowing it all up, together with the depots where it is stored.

Commenting on the latest in a series of depot explosions and fires, President Dmitry Medvedev said these accidents have become "systemic." The first series of blasts occurred in Bashkortostan in May where, according to official reports, a soldier threw a shell liner containing a detonator cap on the floor. Then a large blast occurred at an ammunitions depot near Izhevsk in the Udmurtia republic on June 2.

Fed up with this "system," Medvedev called for harsh punishment for individuals who are found liable for the accidents. After similar explosions occurred at a Defense Ministry arsenal in Ulyanovsk in 2009, Medvedev fired more than a dozen military commanders.

The depot near Izhevsk was the 12th to be blown to bits in the past 10 years. Moreover, a number of minor incidents have occurred over the last two years that were never reported to the president. Two soldiers and four defense industry workers were killed while disposing

shells in Biysk in the Altai region on July 3, 2010.

Two days after that tragedy, an officer was killed and another soldier was seriously injured when they tried to dispose of gunpowder and fuses for grenades at a firing range near Samara. On Oct. 28, a fire broke out at a munitions warehouse in the Amur region that caused 2.2 million rubles ($78,800) in damage.

On April 6, three people died and two were seriously injured when a 40-kilogram box of gunpowder exploded at an artillery base near Lipetsk.

The problem is that Russia's munitions depots are overflowing with so many old and dangerous artillery shells, mines and ammunition — 1.5 million to 2 million tons by most estimates — that the military can't maintain them or properly dispose of them. The huge amount of ammunition is a result of the Soviet military strategy, which stocked up to prepare for a worst-case scenario — a two-front war against NATO and China. This also explains why the Soviet Union broke world records in the number of tanks produced for a single army: 60,000.

But unlike outdated tanks, which can be left to rust at a Siberian military outpost somewhere without much concern, it is too risky to leave artillery munitions, bombs and rocket-propelled grenades to fate. They must be disposed of properly before they explode in an accident.

In 2005, the government allocated 3 billion rubles ($107.4 million) for a special munitions disposal program. The initial plan was to follow the Soviet practice of disposing of munitions at the factories where they were first produced. But then authorities discovered that shipping the munitions to those plants would have cost at least 15 billion rubles ($537 million), or five times the amount budgeted for the entire disposal program. For this and other reasons, Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov ordered a temporary halt to disposal programs.

The country's conscript army has exacerbated the dangers. History has shown that the country's poorly trained 18- and 19-year-old conscripts have had a poor record of complying with safety regulations.

Corruption is another contributing cause. For example, the explosion at the Udmurtia depot reportedly occurred immediately after an "inspection" by the military prosecutor.

Early this year, Medvedev approved an ambitious program to allocate 19 trillion rubles ($680 billion) for re-equipping the military. Perhaps some of those funds should be redirected toward the disposal of the country's outdated bombs, mines and shells. They could be shipped by rail to factories that have the capacity to safely destroy munitions. That would also provide needed income to industries whose chiefs have been bemoaning a lack of government defense orders.

The problem is that such a program would require large funding and a strict system of supervision and accountability to make sure that allocated funds reach their intended targets and that weapons-destruction quotas are filled. Russia has always had trouble in these areas. Therefore, it is much easier to simply fire a dozen or so colonels and hope that people will forget about the explosions — at least until the next one occurs.

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