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Ten more nations may have nuclear arms on the drawing board — if not in hand

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As the United States, the Soviet Union, China, Britain, and France build up their existing nuclear arsenals, about 10 other countries are approaching or achieving the capability to make — and deliver — home-grown nuclear weapons.

This is the conclusion of a six-month investigation by ABC News, which discloses new proliferation of nuclear-weapons capability in Latin America, South Asia, and the Middle East.

President Kennedy predicted in 1963 that by the end of the 1970s "15 to 20 to 25 nations" might have the bomb.

This was never realized because the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty and safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have helped many states decide that "they would be better off without nuclear weapons," says David Price, an analyst at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, an arms control foundation.

But Leonard S. Spector, a leading US expert on nonproliferation, wrote in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists in January, "Although no new nation tested a first nuclear device during 1984 . . . all of the threshold countries appear to have taken steps, in some case significant, toward developing or expanding nuclear weapons capabilities."

Mr. Spector, author of "Nuclear Proliferation Today," included in the category of "threshold countries" Pakistan, India, Israel, Argentina, Brazil, Iraq, Libya, and South Africa.

Investigation in and about the threshold nations disclosed new information, some of which is highly frustrating for the Reagan administration's anti-proliferation hopes and disappointing for the IAEA safeguards system.

Today's greatest proliferation danger may lie in South Asia, according to experts in Vienna and Stockholm.

India's Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi told a reporter earlier this year, "If we [had] wanted to make bombs in these 11 years" since India's test of what it referred to as a "peaceful" nuclear device on May 18, 1974, "we could have."

Mr. Gandhi said India has not taken such a step. But in recent press interviews, he has said that India is considering how to respond to the possibility that Pakistan has a nuclear weapon.

US government experts see no evidence that India has produced any more "devices" since 1974. They do believe, however, that through its safeguarded and unsafeguarded network of advanced nuclear installations, India has increased its capability to produce enough weapons-grade plutonium to soon produce 10 nuclear bombs a year.

Companies in France, Switzerland, Belgium, and West Germany all have reportedly helped Pakistan work toward keeping the promise of the late Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to "make an Islamic bomb, even if we have to eat grass to do it."

An engineer in Freiburg, West Germany, recently convicted and fined for illegal exports of sensitive nuclear equipment, allegedly helped Pakistan acquire a uranium hexafluoride plant, an important link in enriching uranium 235 to the high degree needed for weapons.

French firms and Belgium's Belgonucleaire earlier provided assistance for the Pinstech reprocessing plant, near Islamabad, Pakistan. It produces plutonium which will soon be enough for two bombs a year. In Kahuta, Pakistan, an enrichment plant is reportedly in operation, and diplomats and newsmen have in past years been beaten up for getting too close to it.

Munir Ahmed Khan, chairman of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission, at first declined to discuss Kahuta with this writer. Later he told ABC that "we are carrying out research and development in enrichment using the centrifuge process." Centrifuges are normally used to separate uranium 235 from less fissionable isotopes of uranium. Highly enriched uranium 235 can be used in nuclear weapons.

British experts and US intelligence sources have reported that Pakistan has been combing Europe for shaped-steel plates. These fit over the two steel hemispheres enclosing the nuclear explosive, somewhat like the sections of a soccer ball.

Western intelligence believes China provided a bomb design to Pakistan. This was one factor that led the US administration and Congress to delay an agreement for nuclear-power reactors that President Reagan initialed in Peking last April. In the design, a conventional explosive is placed between hemispheres and plates, causing the implosion that produces a nuclear blast.

Last June, Nazir Ahmed Vaid, a Pakistani, was arrested in the US and later deported after trying to buy 50 krytrons, devices that can be used to trigger nuclear weapons.

Israel recently admitted it had imported about 80 krytrons but said they were used for nonnuclear explosions. An American is being prosecuted in Los Angeles for allegedly smuggling the krytrons to Israel.

It is widely assumed that Israel's frequent statement that it "will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the Mideast" thinly masks a considerable Israeli nuclear arsenal ready for instant assembly.

Carl Duckett, a former deputy director at the Central Intelligence Agency, said in 1981 that the CIA estimated that weapons-grade uranium (more than 200 pounds, enough for four bombs) allegedly went to Israel from a firm called NUMEC in Apollo, Pa. Israel extracts uranium from its phosphates and is believed by specialists to import South African uranium as well.

Israeli-developed techniques, such as laser separation of uranium isotopes, are believed by the same specialists

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