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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

to have been shared with South Africa, which was apparently preparing to test a bomb in the Kalahari Desert in 1979. Soviet and US satellites spotted the apparatus and test preparations and warned the Pretoria regime to desist.

Antinuclear agencies in London and Washington recently declared that now-public US documents "prove" that a mysterious flash detected by a US satellite over the South Atlantic in September 1979 was a joint Israel-South African test.

At Dimona, in Israel's Negev Desert, France provided nuclear help in the 1950s. At the time, Israel built a 26-megawatt reactor capable of producing enough plutonium to make one bomb a year. Israel has also built a reprocessing plant nearby and recently enlarged Dimona's capacity.

Now, Israeli sources say, the US is exerting "strong pressure" on France not to sell Israel two 950-megawatt power reactors. Israel has not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty and does not allow safeguards inspection of all its nuclear plants. (The Non-Proliferation Treaty is due for review at a Geneva conference in September.)

France would have to supply virtually all of the \$2 billion to \$3 billion in credits if the deal went through. Israel's economy is virtually bankrupt.

Since Israeli planes destroyed Iraq's French-built Osirak nuclear reactor near Baghdad in 1981, much Arab-world attention has shifted to Libya. Heavy US government persuasion on Belgium last fall, and guarantees from French and German competitors that they would not take Belgium's place, stopped a \$1 billion deal for nuclear wares and services to Col. Muammar Qaddafi by Belgonucleaire, a partially state-owned Belgian firm.

Libya has signed and ratified the Non-Proliferation Treaty. It disavows nuclear-weapons intentions. With Soviet help, it operates a 25-megawatt experimental reactor for research at Tajura, near Tripoli, Libya. IAEA inspectors and even Western experts have seen it and pronounced it "clean."

But reports continue to circulate in the intelligence community that Libya either already operates or seeks to operate a clandestine, nonsafeguarded uranium-enrichment facility.

Syria is the only Arab neighbor of Israel left out of recent efforts to get Israel and the Arabs to negotiate a

trade of peace for territory that Israel conquered. The Syrian government has generally been cautious in its statements about nuclear weapons. It has received Soviet proposals for future nuclear electricity plants — which the Soviet exporters always safeguard with great care.

However, the Syrian defense minister, Gen. Mustafa Tlas, said in an ABC News interview last year that he "hopes" the Arabs can develop nuclear weapons, "because this is necessary to their independence." He told Der Spiegel, a West German magazine, that the Soviets had promised to defend Syria with a nuclear umbrella of their own weapons, if necessary, in case of a nuclear first strike by Israel.

Using Saudi Arabian intermediaries and possibly Saudi cash, Syria and Iraq reportedly both showed interest when a gang of international drug and arms traffickers, and alleged Western intelligence officials, dangled nuclear bait before them, according to interviews in Italy and court documents provided by Italian Judge Carlo Palermo.

Three "atomic bombs," referred to as "the toys" in telex messages seen by this writer, were apparently offered to Syria between 1980 and 1982 by an official of the former Nugan Hand Bank in Australia. The bank was cited by Wall Street Journal reports on Aug. 17 and 18, 1983, as a suspected cover for CIA activities.

In Italy, Judge Palermo reached the conclusion that such "bombs" did not actually exist but were offered in a ploy to see how Syrians or others would respond.

A telex in the court records shows that a Saudi, "Sheikh Awany al-Faisal," deposited some \$800 million in the Deutsche Bank of West Germany to pay for the "bombs." But the "buyers" shied away when Israeli and South African agents apparently learned (or were told) of the proposed transaction.

What did exist, the Italian records show, was a large quantity of enriched uranium said to have been stolen from French stocks and offered Iraq by the traffickers.

At first, Iraq accepted. But then, perhaps smelling a trap, it pulled out of the deal for enriched uranium.

The writer, a former Monitor staff correspondent, is now an ABC News correspondent based in London and specializing in the Middle East. A three-hour ABC News television program, on which this article is based, is scheduled to air this evening. The show is called "The Fire Unleashed."