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'Dramatic' Soviet weapons buildup seen

By Bill Gertz
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Two senior intelligence officials testified yesterday that the Soviet Union is continuing a large-scale strategic weapons buildup that could lead to the deployment of 16,000 to 21,000 Soviet nuclear warheads by 1994.

There are an estimated 9,000 warheads in the Soviet arsenal.

Deputy CIA Director for Intelligence Robert Gates and National Intelligence Officer Lawrence Gershwin told a joint Senate hearing that new Soviet weapons deployments, while not dramatic in scale, eventually will replace all current strategic forces with modern and less vulnerable mobile weapons.

Neither official would comment on the implications of the Soviet buildup for the U.S.-Soviet nuclear weapons balance.

But Mr. Gershwin stressed that the Soviet buildup, especially advances in mobile ICBM efforts, has progressed at a constant pace.

"It's dramatic in that there is a lot going on," Mr. Gershwin said of new Soviet weapons deployments.

The CIA officials said Soviet defense spending would probably grow at a rate of 3 percent to 4 percent of the Soviet gross national product per year over the next five years. Last year the Soviet GNP was \$2.35 trillion.

Yesterday, the House approved \$292 billion for the U.S. defense budget in a move that essentially freezes defense spending at current levels with no allowance for inflation. It is about \$10 billion below the Senate budget passed three weeks ago, which lets spending increase at the predicted inflation rate.

The unusual testimony by the intelligence officials was criticized by some Democratic panel members, who charged that the report on Soviet weapons "politicized" the intelligence community in an effort to garner public support for the Reagan administration's defense spending request.

The administration had requested a 5.9 percent increase in defense spending beyond inflation in an initial budget request of \$322 billion.

Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, chairman of the Defense appropriations subcommittee that held the hearing, countered the Democrats' charges by saying the hearing was the result of bipartisan requests for a declassified version of briefings held earlier this year. The hearing was also sponsored by the Senate Armed Services Committee.

He described the intelligence estimate as "things about the Russians we know [and] they know, but the public doesn't know."

The two officials were asked by Sen. William Proxmire, D-Wis., to explain the difference between a previous estimate showing an estimated 2 percent annual growth rate in Soviet weapons spending and the levels presented at the hearing.

Mr. Gates defended the intelligence estimate, admitting that Soviet spending levels are difficult to determine accurately.

"What we do know is what we see on the ground," Mr. Gates said in a reference to intelligence analysis of satellite photographs.

Sen. James McClure, R-Wyo., a vocal critic of administration arms control policies and a key supporter of yesterday's hearing, said the latest intelligence estimate shows "a serious missile gap" between the United States and the Soviet Union.

He said the report is one "indication that the Soviet Union plans to break out of the SALT II and ABM treaties."

Mr. Gershwin testified that though the latest estimate does not judge it "likely" the Soviets will deploy a nationwide anti-ballistic missile system, "the Soviets could deploy such a system in the next few years."

He said that by the end of the decade the Soviets will have deployed all the components necessary for a nationwide ABM system, including a network of six large early-warning radars and a new system of fast-acceleration ballistic missile interceptors.

"Our evaluation is that by the 1990s they could have in place a fairly large ABM system," Mr. Gershwin said. "They have provided for the option."