

Nerve gas cloud hangs over West German firms

- Nerve gas link between Iraq and Germany
- Companies face severe penalties

Munich

DID West German companies ship nerve gas production facilities to Iraq? The question is being asked again in the wake of Iraq's apparent use of chemical weapons in an attack on the Kurdish village of Halabja in northeastern Iraq on 17 March.

Uproar over the issue caught a slumbering Bonn by surprise. The West German capital was nearly empty last week for the Easter parliamentary recess. But opposition leaders demanded an investigation to determine if West German companies had delivered factories capable of producing nerve gas. Foreign Minister Hans-

Dietrich Genscher (Free Democrat) called for an international ban on the production of chemical weapons.

Iraq is reported to have used the nerve gases tabun and sarin, derivatives of materials used in pesticides and fertilizers. The United Nations has claimed repeated use of chemical weapons by Iraq against Iranian troops since 1984.

West German law forbids the shipment of facilities that might be used to produce chemical weapons. This would include the pesticide factories described above. Criminal penalties for such export include gaol terms of up to three years and unlimited fines. The penalties for exporting chemical or other weapons themselves to Iran or Iraq are far harsher. The use of chemical weapons violates the 1925 Geneva Protocol banning their use. Both Iran and Iraq are signatories of the agreement.

Twelve companies suspected of having violated the law are already being investigated. Raids on the companies' offices in November 1987 yielded thousands of documents.

One company being investigated, WET (Water Engineering Technology) of Hamburg, admits that it shipped up to 70 per cent of the parts necessary for a pesticide and fertilizer factory to Iraq between 1985 and 1987, when the shipments first drew public notice. WET's lawyer, Thomas Marx, also admits that the pesticides could be used as precursors to chemical weapons "with five or six additional steps". But Marx says that the parts were never assembled.

A spokesman for the Foreign Ministry said that the government has been diligent in updating the laws covering export to Iraq and Iran. A clause was added to the foreign trade laws as early as 1984 requiring licences for the export of facilities that could create the precursors for chemical weapons. No licences have ever been issued. The laws were strengthened in January 1987 to include more possible precursors in accordance with a European Community measure.

Most sources agree that the larger problem — that Iraq has the ability to produce poison gas and is not afraid to use it — will not be solved by West German action alone. Iran has threatened to retaliate in kind if the attacks do not stop. It remains to be seen whether Genscher's initiative comes soon enough, and is strong enough, to prevent escalation. **Steven Dickman**

US and Soviet science deal to be renewed

Washington

THE United States and the Soviet Union will begin work in earnest next month to renew the basic science agreement between the two countries that lapsed six years ago. Other scientific agreements in the fields of transportation and the environment also are receiving renewed attention, and even the controversial issue of AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) may soon receive direct government-to-government attention.

Scientific agreements with the Soviet Union have been popular items in the United States lately. Earlier this year, the National Academy of Sciences renewed and expanded its agreement with the Soviet Academy of Sciences (see *Nature* 331, 197; 1988), and agreements on space and health have been invigorated (see *Nature* 323, 482; 1986 and 326, 234; 1987). The basic science agreement, designed to be an umbrella for all other scientific exchanges, was among those allowed to lapse in the early 1980s as a protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The US State Department and the Soviet Foreign Ministry have already held preliminary discussions about renewing the basic science agreement. Although scientists in both countries have been enthusiastic about renewed cooperation, there are still areas where the two governments do not see eye-to-eye.

Intellectual property rights and technology transfer issues are potential stumbling blocks. The United States is also keen to keep human rights questions on the table for discussion, insisting that any Soviet scientist should be eligible to participate in exchange activities.

Although both countries have been enthusiastic about cooperation in health, AIDS has remained a sore point. The United States took great exception to suggestions made in the Soviet press that the AIDS virus was part of some US biological weapons experiment gone awry, and refused to discuss anything about the disease until the Soviet Union repudiated such charges.

That appeared to have happened last year, and assistant secretary of health Robert Windom scheduled a visit to Moscow to discuss AIDS. But earlier this year press reports about the biological weapons scenario surfaced again, and the Windom trip was called off. After repeated assurances the United States is satisfied that the Soviet Union has abandoned its claims, and the Windom trip is on again, although no date has been set.

Joseph Palca

Home test kits for AIDS blocked

Washington

PLANS to market home kits to test for the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) which causes AIDS have been quashed by new guidelines from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

According to the FDA, more than twelve companies had expressed interest in selling test kits over the counter at drugstores and supermarkets in much the same way that pregnancy test kits are marketed. The kits would permit users to take a blood sample for mailing to a testing laboratory.

In a letter sent out to potential manufacturers of the kits last week, FDA stopped short of a ban on home testing. But such stringent criteria for pre-marketing research of home test kits are laid out in the letter that it is unlikely that anyone will persist in seeking approval.

The key provision in the FDA rules is that "a professional health care provider" must be responsible "for reporting and interpretation of the result to the requester of the test, as well as for counselling". FDA officials say they are frightened of the psychological damage that might be caused to someone who learns that he or she is HIV-positive through an impersonal letter from a testing laboratory, particularly if there is any possibility of a false-positive result.

Potential manufacturers expressed annoyance at the letter, arguing that it ran counter to the idea of freely available mass testing. An FDA spokesman said it will continue to gather information on the acceptability of home testing and may reconsider later.

Alun Anderson