

Death rides the winds of war

"If it's really a pharmaceutical plant," I asked a senior Libyan diplomat, "why is it so big? Exactly what kind of drugs are they making?" "Ah, my friend," he replied unhappily, "they only tell me about medicines."

Well, I'd bet my fez the notorious Libyan plant at Rabta is making more than suppositories and antibiotics. The only kind of drug manufacturing that would require such a large, three-story plant would be production of raw materials — which Libya is not doing.

So the U.S., after crying wolf about Libya for years, is probably right when it says the Rabta plant is for making chemical weapons. Mind you, the plant could just as nicely turn out fertilizer and I wonder why the Libyans didn't claim this was its purpose. Probably because Moammar Khadafy said — off his gold-braided cuff — the plant was for "medicines." Once said, everyone in Libya had to back up this implausible story.

Meanwhile, ABC News got a tip from the lately leaky U.S. defence department: Iraq was secretly producing germ warfare agents in an underground plant near Baghdad. Air, in the Mideast, is getting even deadlier than politics.

Some calm observations. First, Washington's noisy alarms about the threat of chemical terrorism from Libya are hypocritical. During the Gulf War, Iraq, a U.S. ally, used chemical weapons on a broad scale. French and West German firms put together Iraq's three chemical plants, which were described as "insecticide factories."

Washington didn't say boo until worldwide outrage erupted over Iraq's beastly gassing of Kurds. I wouldn't be surprised if the U.S. secretly assisted Iraq in developing its chemical warfare capabilities.



Eric M. ARGOLIS

Far more important, the U.S. government has shut its eyes tightly to Israel's extensive nuclear and chemical weapons programs. According to CIA studies, the nation *most likely* to use nuclear weapons is Israel. Early in the 1973 war, say CIA sources, Israel began arming its nuclear weapons.

National Security Agency reports that Israel and South Africa may have jointly tested a nuclear device in the atmosphere were hushed up. Washington chose to see no evil. Yet it was precisely Israel's nuclear program that caused Egypt, Syria, Iraq and likely Libya to develop chemical and now biological weapons. Those, like the U.S., who claim there is no cause and effect between the two issues are either lying or fooling themselves.

Did anyone really expect the Arab states would simply watch Israel build its nuclear muscles and do nothing? The Arabs may be technologically backward and militarily inept, but they are not stupid. There is no way the Arab states would allow Israel to hold a nuclear six-gun to their heads without responding. Particularly now that secret French and U.S. aid has allowed Israel to develop missiles that can drop nuclear warheads on every Mideast capital from Tunis to Tehran.

Unable to obtain nuclear arms, the Arabs opted for the poor man's strategic weapons — germs and gas. As far back as the mid-1960s, Egypt threatened to retaliate against any Israeli nuclear attack by firing back missiles packed with germs or radioactive wastes. Iraq now appears to be doing the same.

Another side note: Understand that a lot of the hoo-hah over Libya is custom-made. Hard-right, pro-Israeli factions inside the defence department have leaked the information to try to short circuit improving relations with the Arabs, in general, and the PLO in particular. We may even see more leaks, like "Arafat linked to Rabta plant, say U.S. intelligence sources."

Also, the Libyan gas drama nicely diverts attention away from the increasingly bloody uprising on the West Bank and Gaza. Cynical, of course, but that's how the propaganda game is played in Washington.

What's to be done? The Arabs, quite obviously, are not going to scrap their chemical and germ weapons until Israel gets rid of its nuclear and chemical arsenal. The Jewish state is not about to give up what it regards as its insurance policy against any second Holocaust.

Let's say the Americans pop some Tomahawk cruise missiles onto the Rabta plant. Will they also bomb plants in Syria, Egypt and Iraq? Even if this happens, the Arabs will still be able to buy gas and germ weapons from places like North Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, India or Pakistan.

Finally, as hideous as gas and germ weapons may be, remember that the biggest killers of men remain shells and bullets. Since 1918, horrible but unprotected napalm has killed more people than gas. Why is it okay to burn people with napalm but not okay to do so with mustard gas?