

Russian Missile System Deployments Jeopardize U.S. Commitment to INF Treaty

WASHINGTON – If Russia does not dismantle a cruise missile system that the United States believes violates the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty by Feb. 2, the U.S. will “suspend” compliance with the treaty and begin internal discussions on whether to declare its intent to withdraw from the 1987 pact, the undersecretary for arms control and international security said Jan. 24.

During negotiations last week in Geneva, the Russians acknowledged they have fielded the 9M729 Novator missile but denied it violates the INF range limit, Andrea Thompson said.

The meeting with Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov was “professional, not the usual bluster,” Thompson told a Defense Writers breakfast at the George Washington University. “But at the end of the day, we didn’t break any new ground. There was no new information.”

Thompson said the Russians offered to allow U.S. experts to see “a static display” of the Novator, which was rejected as not providing any evidence of the missile’s range. The United States has shared its intelligence findings that show the missile exceeds the 500 kilometers treaty limit (about 300 miles) with Russia and with U.S. allies and partners, she said.

She would not say whether U.S. intelligence has determined if the Novators are armed with nuclear or conventional warheads.

The Russians have deployed five battalions of the missiles, which could hit most U.S. allies in Europe, Thompson said.

"This is not a test system. Soldiers in uniform are manning it," she said.

The only way Russia could come back into compliance with the INF is to destroy the missile and its launchers, she said.

If the U.S. terminates its commitment to the INF, it would be free to develop and field missiles that match or exceed the Novator, she said. European news services have reported that some NATO allies have expressed concern about ending the INF, fearing it would spur the Russians to field even more missiles. But Thompson said all of the allies and partners agree that Russia has violated the treaty.

She said discussions on whether any of the allies would agree to field a new U.S. missile "have not occurred. We are trying to get Russia back into compliance."

Asked why the United States would need to develop a new missile when it already has weapons that could threaten Russia, Thompson said, "we need redundant systems to defend ourselves."

The Russians continue to claim that some U.S. missile defense systems, including the Aegis Ashore installations operational in Romania and under construction in Poland, violate the INF, despite their defensive nature.

Thompson said Russian violation of INF should not affect other arms control agreements. Discussions continue with Moscow on extending the New Start strategic forces treaty, which expires in two years, and the United States remains in compliance with the pact that limits the number of fielded strategic nuclear weapons and warheads.