

'We duped the world'

SAM SOLE *Weekend Argus*
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SOUTH Africa duped the United States, the Soviet Union and her Cuban surrogate into believing this country had an offensive capability in chemical warfare.

This was one of the startling claims to emerge in a frank interview with the chief of the SA Medical Services, Surgeon General Niel Knobel.

Following Weekend Argus disclosures about SA's secret chemical weapons research programme, General Knobel lifted the lid on the secret anti-chemical warfare project launched under the SAMS arm



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of the Defence Force in the early 80s.

General Knobel, a former professor of anatomy at the University of Pretoria, gave a categorical assurance that South Africa never developed an offensive Chemical/Biological Warfare (CBW) capability, but revealed it had, for strategic reasons, taken some trouble to have the great powers believe it did have a strike potential.

"One of the effective ways to protect your forces from the use of chemical weapons by the other side is to have them believe you are able to hit back in the same way," he said.

But, said General Knobel, it was a real scare over evidence that the Cubans and MPLA in Angola had chemical weapons which prompted the SADF to institute a crash programme to develop protective gear for its soldiers and its vehicles.

■ A top general has partly lifted the lid on the secrets of South Africa's chemical war programme.

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"We had virtually nothing more than World War 1 vintage gas masks. We started from scratch. Today we are the leaders in Africa in defensive CBW technology. That's an achievement we are proud of."

However, he admitted that to develop this capability in the face of international sanctions required the by now familiar range of covert and front operations.

Front companies were set up both inside and outside South Africa to scour the world for the best materials and technology and to gather intelligence on CBW in the West and behind the Iron Curtain.

Private companies, some set up with State funds, were contracted to do research work for the defence force. One of these was Protechnik, which was recently acquired by Armscor.

According to Weekend Argus information another was Delta G in Midrand, which was bought by Sen-trachem after the project was closed down.

The network associated with the project included air transport companies: "You will appreciate that you cannot bring in these things (equipment and chemicals) via South African Airways," said General Knobel.

Although he would not put a figure to the cost of the project, which began to wind down in the late 80s, General Knobel said it was always fully audited.

The cost to the State was also offset by the fact that the front companies also did legitimate commercial business.

General Knobel said if there had been a misuse of project funds — a matter which has been under investigation by the Office for Serious Economic Offences for nearly two years — then he would welcome its exposure.

He said he recommended the project be scaled down soon after he was appointed as Surgeon General in 1988. "I was satisfied we had achieved our objective. But it is still necessary to maintain a technological edge," he said.

"That is why it was felt that Armscor should take over Protechnik, to have an official state research and development establishment such as the British or the Americans have."