

Reports: Russian general challenges US on missiles

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MOSCOW: A top Russian general aimed tough remarks at the U.S. on Monday before Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's visit, reconfirming plans for multiple-warhead missiles and warning Washington that refitting rockets with conventional warheads would raise the risk of nuclear war.

Lt. Gen. Andrei Shvaichenko's comments quoted by Russian news agencies come as Moscow and Washington seek to negotiate a replacement for a 1991 arms control treaty that expires at the end of the year. It is a major element in their efforts to mend relations that were badly strained during the Bush administration.

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Shvaichenko's words appeared designed to remind the U.S. of Russia's nuclear might and press it to heed Moscow's concerns.

Shvaichenko, commander of the Strategic Missile Forces, reiterated that Russia will begin deploying RS-24 missiles with multiple warheads in December, the same month that the START I treaty expires.

The U.S. has said the missiles would violate a treaty provision against adding multiple warheads to existing single-warhead missiles, but Russia asserts it is a new missile.

"Putting RS-24 intercontinental ballistic missiles in service will strengthen (Russia's) combat capabilities," ITAR-Tass quoted Shvaichenko as saying at the force's headquarters outside Moscow. He said the first deployment of the missiles would be in the Ivanovo province, northeast of the capital.

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Pressing Russia's position on another prickly issue, Shvaichenko criticized plans aired during the Bush administration to fit some U.S. strategic missiles with conventional non-nuclear warheads, saying the launch of such missiles could provoke a mistaken nuclear strike in retaliation.

A state that detected such a missile heading in its direction "would determine the risk it faced according to a worst-case scenario," RIA Novosti quoted Shvaichenko as saying — meaning that it would likely respond with nuclear weapons. He said such a shift "would seriously undermine ... international security as a whole."

The U.S. State Department declined immediate comment on Shvaichenko's remarks.

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