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FM MOSCOW

TO DESKBY 302000Z FCO

TELNO 508

OF 301915Z APRIL 86

INFO IMMEDIATE STOCKHOLM, HELSINKI, OSLO, COPENHAGEN, BONN,

INFO IMMEDIATE WARSAW, WASHINGTON, UKMIS VIENNA.

INFO ROUTINE PARIS, THE HAGUE, UKREP BRUSSELS, BRUSSELS,

INFO ROUTINE LUXEMBOURG, DUBLIN, PRAGUE, EAST BERLIN, BUDAPEST.

MY TEL NO 502: CHERNOBYL NUCLEAR ACCIDENT: SOVIET RESPONSE

1. I WAS SUMMONED TO THE SOVIET MFA AT 2000 LOCAL THIS EVENING, 30 APRIL, BY FIRST DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER KOVALEV. KOVALEV HAD WITH HIM PETROSYANTS (CHAIRMAN OF THE STATE COMMITTEE FOR THE PEACEFUL USE OF ATOMIC ENERGY) AND YAGODIN (MINISTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION). THIS HIGH-POWERED TRIO HAD CLEARLY BEEN INSTRUCTED BY THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP TO CONDUCT A BELATED PUBLIC RELATIONS EXERCISE TO ATTEMPT TO RESTORE SOVIET CREDIBILITY SEMICLN AND TO RETRIEVE THE DAMAGE DONE BY THE CHERNOBYL EPISODE TO THE SOVIET UNION'S INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION. THE MAIN POINTS IN OUR DISCUSSION, WHICH LASTED FOR FORTY FIVE MINUTES, WERE AS FOLLOWS.

2. KOVALEV SAID THAT A FURTHER STATEMENT BY THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT WOULD BE PUBLISHED TONIGHT GIVING MORE DETAILS OF THE AFTERMATH OF THE CHERNOBYL ACCIDENT (IT HAS NOW APPEARED ON TASS - TEXT IN MIFT). DUE TO MEASURES ALREADY TAKEN BY THE SOVIET AUTHORITIES, THE LEVEL OF RADIOACTIVITY IN THE VICINITY OF CHERNOBYL HAD SUBSTANTIALLY SUBSIDED. IT WAS BEING CONSTANTLY MEASURED. THERE HAD BEEN NO CHAIN REACTION IN THE CHERNOBYL PLANT AND THE REACTOR IN WHICH THE ACCIDENT HAD OCCURRED WAS 'IN A SUBDUED STATE'. THE CASUALTY FIGURES PUT OUT BY FOREIGN NEWS AGENCIES WERE ENTIRELY INCORRECT: ONLY 2 PEOPLE, KOVALEV REAFFIRMED, HAD BEEN KILLED. 197 HAD BEEN HOSPITALISED AND OF THESE ABOUT 50 HAD SINCE BEEN DISCHARGED. ALTHOUGH THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT UNDERSTOOD THE ANXIETIES AROUSED BY THE ACCIDENT, THERE WAS NOW NO CAUSE FOR CONCERN. LIFE IN KIEV AND ITS SURROUNDING DISTRICTS WAS NORMAL: FACTORIES AND FARMS WERE FUNCTIONING AS USUAL. THE SOVIET AUTHORITIES RECOGNISED THEIR RESPONSIBILITY TO PROVIDE MEDICAL CARE FOR ALL WHO MIGHT NEED IT, INCLUDING FOREIGNERS. HE REQUESTED ME TO REASSURE THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT THAT ALL WAS NOW WELL: HE SAID THIS, AS HE WOULD BE SAYING TO OTHER AMBASSADORS, ON THE DIRECT INSTRUCTIONS OF THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP.

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3. PETROSYANTS THEN MADE A MORE CONTENTIOUS STATEMENT, ARGUING THAT REPROACHES (INCLUDING THAT WHICH HE HAD VOICED TO SUSLOV EARLIER (IN THE DAY) ADDRESSED TO THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT WERE UNJUSTIFIED, THAT FOREIGN REACTIONS WERE OVERDRAMATISED AND BASED ON RUMOURS, AND THAT THE SOVIET HANDLING OF THE CHERNOBYL INCIDENT HAD BEEN ENTIRELY CORRECT. (IT HAD TAKEN THE AMERICANS SEVERAL MONTHS TO DISCLOSE THE DETAILS OF WHAT HAD OCCURRED AT THREE MILE ISLAND; AND AN ACCOUNT OF THE WINDSCALE ACCIDENT IN 1957 HAD NOT EXACTLY BEEN RELEASED "ON THE FOLLOWING DAY"). THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT'S OFFER OF ASSISTANCE HAD BEEN NOTED WITH GRATITUDE BUT THE SOVIET UNION DISPOSED OF ALL THE EXPERTISE AND TECHNOLOGY NECESSARY FOR DEALING WITH THE ACCIDENT AND ITS AFTERMATH AND NO OUTSIDE HELP WAS REQUIRED.

4. YAGODIN THEN SAID THAT RADIATION LEVELS FOR KIEV AND ELSEWHERE WERE BEING CONSTANTLY MONITORED AND MEDICAL CHECKS HAD BEEN OFFERED TO ALL LOCAL INHABITANTS. THIS FACILITY WAS READILY AVAILABLE TO FOREIGN STUDENTS AS WELL. RADIATION CHECKS ON PEOPLE WHO HAD BEEN EVACUATED FROM THE VICINITY OF THE ACCIDENT SHOWED THAT THEIR DOSAGE WAS "LOWER THAN THE PROFESSIONAL NORM, NAMELY 0.0075 MILLI-RONTGENS PER HOUR" AND BY YESTERDAY, 29 APRIL, HAD FALLEN TO ZERO. HE, TOO, URGED ME TO REASSURE OUR STUDENTS, WHOSE DEPARTURE HE VERY MUCH REGRETTED. KOVALEV ADDED THAT OUR STUDENTS COULD BE GIVEN MEDICAL CHECK-UPS AT THE MOSCOW POLYCLINIC FROM 0900 ONWARDS ON 1 MAY AND HE WAS ASKED TO BRING THIS FACILITY TO THEIR ATTENTION. (THE MFA HAVE SINCE TELEPHONED TO SAY THAT THESE MEDICAL CHECKS ARE TO BE COMPULSORY FOR ALL THOSE WISHING TO FLY OUT).

5. IN ANSWER TO MY QUESTION, PETROSYANTS SAID DIRECTLY THAT THE FIRE IN THE REACTOR WHERE THE ACCIDENT HAD OCCURRED HAD BEEN EXTINGUISHED.

6. AT VARIOUS POINTS IN THE DISCUSSION HE STRESSED THAT FRANK DISCLOSURE BY THE SOVIET AUTHORITIES AT THE OUTSET COULD HAVE AVERTED THE ANXIETIES AND CONCERNS WHICH INEVITABLY PROLIFERATED ONCE THE ACCIDENT HAD BEEN DETECTED FROM OUTSIDE THE SOVIET UNION; AND THAT THE RESULTING LOSS OF CONFIDENCE, FOR EXAMPLE BY FOREIGN STUDENTS, WAS PROBABLY IRREVERSIBLE. HE DISPUTED PETROSYANTS' PARALLEL BETWEEN CHERNOBYL AND THREE MILE ISLAND/WINDSCALE, POINTING OUT THAT THE LATTER ACCIDENTS HAD NOT AFFECTED ANY OTHER COUNTRIES. HE ALSO MADE IT CLEAR, WHILE WELCOMING THE SOVIET DECISION TO RELEASE FURTHER DETAILS OF WHAT HAD HAPPENED, THAT WE STILL EXPECTED DETAILED ANSWERS TO THE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS WHICH HE HAD TRANSMITTED TO THE MFA EARLIER IN THE DAY. THIS SHOULD BE

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THE BEGINNING OF A DIALOGUE IN THE INTERESTS OF FUTURE NUCLEAR SAFETY, AND NOT THE END OF IT. I THANKED THOSE CONCERNED FOR THE COOPERATION WHICH HAS SO FAR BEEN SHOWN BY THE SOVIET AUTHORITIES IN ENABLING OUR STUDENTS TO LEAVE KIEV AND MINSK ONCE THEY HAD DECIDED, OF THEIR OWN FREE WILL AND WITHOUT ANY URGING FROM US, TO DO SO.

7. IF YOU SEE NO OBJECTION, I PROPOSE TO ARRANGE FOR ALL OUR DEPARTING STUDENTS, WHEN THEY ARRIVE IN MOSCOW TOMORROW (1 MAY) TO BE INFORMED OF THE CONSIDERATIONS PUT FORWARD BY KOVALEV AND HIS COLLEAGUES. THIS WILL NOT BE DONE IN ANY WAY WHICH COULD BE SEEN AS AN ATTEMPT TO INFLUENCE THE STUDENTS' DECISION OR TO EXCULPATE THE RUSSIANS: BUT I THINK IT WOULD BE WRONG NOT TO SHARE WITH THEM ALL THE INFORMATION AVAILABLE TO US, INCLUDING WHAT THE RUSSIANS HAVE NOW TOLD US. I SHALL BE VERY SURPRISED, IN ANY CASE, IF IT CUTS MUCH ICE WITH THEM. IN THIS CONTEXT I SHOULD BE GRATEFUL FOR URGENT EXPERT COMMENT (DESKBY 0600Z ON 1 MAY) ON THE RADIATIONS DOSAGE CITED BY YAGODIN (PARAGRAPH 4 ABOVE).

CARTLEDGE

SOVIET NUCLEAR ACCIDENT

LIMITED

NED  
SOVIET DEPT  
WED  
EED  
MAED  
CONS DEPT  
NEWS DEPT  
INFO DEPT  
PUSD  
POD  
ECD(E)

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PS/MR RENTON  
PS/LADY YOUNG  
PS/MR EGGAR  
PS/MRS CHALKER  
PS/PUS  
MR BARRINGTON  
MR DEREK THOMAS  
MR GOODALL  
MR DAUNT  
MR RATFORD

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