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CHERNOBYL

SUMMARY

NEW DETAIL ABOUT THE ACCIDENT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES PROVIDED BY ENERGY SUPREMO SHCHERBINA AT A BRIEFING FOR AMBASSADORS OF SOME WESTERN AND NEUTRAL COUNTRIES. FULL REPORT TO THE IAEA EXPECTED IN JULY. SOMEWHAT INADEQUATE ASSURANCES ON CONTROL OF FOODSTUFFS FROM THE CONTAMINATED AREA.

DETAIL

1. I ATTENDED TODAY, 13 MAY, A BRIEFING MEETING ON CHERNOBYL, CONVENED BY THE MFA, TO WHICH AMBASSADORS OR CHARGES OF SOME WESTERN AND NEUTRAL COUNTRIES (UK, SPAIN, ITALY, CANADA, NETHERLANDS, NORWAY, FINLAND, SWEDEN, TURKEY, FRG, FRANCE, AUSTRIA, DENMARK, LUXEMBOURG AND USA) WERE INVITED. THE CONFERENCE WAS LED BY SHCHERBINA, WHO WAS SUPPORTED BY THE SAME TEAM OF OFFICIALS AND EXPERTS WHICH APPEARED AT HIS PRESS CONFERENCE LAST THURSDAY (MY TELNO 548). TODAY'S MEETING FOLLOWED THE USUAL SOVIET PATTERN OF LENGTHY STATEMENTS BY THE VARIOUS OFFICIALS, BUT SOME TIME WAS ALLOWED FOR QUESTIONS AFTERWARDS.

2. SHCHERBINA OPENED THE PROCEEDINGS WITH A BRIEF AND LARGELY FAMILIAR REVIEW OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE ACCIDENT STRESSING, AS AT SEVERAL POINTS LATER IN THE CONFERENCE, THAT EVEN HIS COMMISSION WERE STILL NOT IN POSSESSION OF ALL THE TECHNICAL FACTS. SOME OF THE DETAILS HE GAVE WERE NEVERTHELESS NEW. THE EXPLOSION ITSELF WAS ATTRIBUTED TO A CHEMICAL REACTION OF ZIRCONIUM AND VAPOUR INSIDE THE REACTOR. AS OF THIS MORNING, 13 MAY, HE STATED, NO MORE RADIOACTIVE EMISSIONS WERE COMING FROM THE DAMAGED REACTOR. THE TEMPERATURE INSIDE THE REACTOR WAS NOW 300-400 DEGREES C.

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3. SHCHERBINA GAVE MORE DETAILS OF MEASURES BEING TAKEN AT THE REACTOR SITE AFTER THE ACCIDENT. A CONCRETE WALL WAS BEING SUNK INTO THE EARTH SURROUNDING THE REACTOR BUILDING, TO A DEPTH OF 32 METRES, TO PREVENT ANY POSSIBLE CONTAMINATION OF GROUND WATER. THIS DEPTH WAS REQUIRED BY THE STRUCTURE OF THE SOIL, WHICH WAS SAND-BASED. A FILM OF 'POLYMATERIAL', SUPPLIED BY THE FRENCH, WAS BEING SPREAD AROUND THE OUTSIDE OF THE PLANT TO ISOLATE RADIOACTIVE FRAGMENTS. A MAJOR TASK WAS TO ENSURE LOWERING OF THE TEMPERATURE AT THE BASE OF THE REACTOR, CAUSED BY DECAY HEAT. LOCAL TRANSPORT WAS CONFINED TO THE AREA, AND VEHICLES OUTSIDE WERE NOT PERMITTED TO ENTER.

4. SHCHERBINA PAID TRIBUTE TO THE VARIOUS FORMS OF ASSISTANCE OFFERED, AND SOME ALREADY RECEIVED, FROM OTHER COUNTRIES. THE SPECIAL SUITS OFFERED BY THE UK HAD ARRIVED, AND WERE IN USE (SHCHERBINA ALSO EXPRESSED HIS APPRECIATION FOR THESE TO ME SEPARATELY ON MY ARRIVAL AND DID NOT CAVIL AT THE NUMBER - FORTY - WHICH HAD BEEN RECEIVED). THE FRG WAS SUPPLYING A REMOTE-CONTROLLED EXCAVATOR AND ROBOTS.

5. SHCHERBINA INSISTED THAT MILK FROM THE CONTAMINATED AREA (NOT FURTHER DEFINED) WAS NEITHER BEING SOLD, NOR USED WITHIN THE AREA: IT WAS BEING 'PROCESSED AND CONSERVED'. MILK SUPPLIES WERE BEING BROUGHT IN AS NECESSARY FROM ELSEWHERE.

6. A SENIOR OFFICIAL OF THE STATE COMMITTEE FOR HYDROMETEOROLOGY, SEDUNOV, THEN TOOK OVER WITH A LENGTHY ACCOUNT OF THE MEASURES BEING TAKEN TO MONITOR RADIOACTIVITY. IN THE AIR, READINGS WERE BEING TAKEN AT VARIOUS ALTITUDES AND ON THE GROUND CHECKS WERE BEING MADE 4 TIMES PER 24 HOURS FOR OVERALL RADIATION, AND SPECIFIC LEVELS OF FALLOUT. SAMPLES OF WATER, SOIL AND VEGETATION WERE CONSTANTLY BEING ANALYSED. WEATHER CONDITIONS AT THE TIME OF THE ACCIDENT (HIGH PRESSURE IN THE EUROPEAN USSR, VIRTUALLY NIL PRECIPITATION AND ABSENCE OF STRONG WINDS) HAD BEEN FAVOURABLE, IN THAT THE MAJOR PROPORTION OF THE RADIOACTIVE FALLOUT HAD TAKEN PLACE IN THE AREA OF CHERNOBYL. IN A STATEMENT LATER VIGOROUSLY CHALLENGED BY A NUMBER OF MY COLLEAGUES, SEDUNOV MAINTAINED THAT NO LONG-DISTANCE FALLOUT HAD TAKEN PLACE OUTSIDE THE TERRITORY OF THE SOVIET UNION, AND THAT THE SOVIET UNION WOULD PRODUCE DATA TO SUBSTANTIATE THIS 'LATER'.

RADIATION LEVELS

7. RADIATION IN THE CHERNOBYL AREA HAD DROPPED SHARPLY FROM ITS HIGH POINT OF 10 TO 15 MILLIROENTGENS PER HOUR SEMICOLON IT NOW STOOD AT 0.24 MILLIROENTGENS PER HOUR. AT ZHLOBIN, WHERE THERE WERE NUMEROUS FOREIGN WORKERS, LEVELS HAD REACHED 0.3-0.4 MILLIROENTGENS PER HOUR BUT WERE NOW DOWN TO 0.2. IN KIEV THIS MORNING (13 MAY) THE LEVEL WAS DOWN

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TO 0.22. READINGS WERE BEING TAKEN AT SIX MONITORING STATIONS ON THE WESTERN BORDERS OF THE USSR PARTLY, SEDUNOV, STATED, TO QUIETEN PUBLIC ANXIETY IN OTHER AFFECTED COUNTRIES (WHICH HE DID NOT DEFINE). AT FOUR OF THESE STATIONS; (NOT NAMED) RADIOACTIVITY LEVELS WERE INSIDE THE LIMITS OF NATURAL BACKGROUND. AT THE OTHER TWO, LEVELS WERE SLIGHTLY HIGHER: AT KISHINEV (MOLDAVIA), 0.03 MILLIROENTGENS PER HOUR, AND AT RAKHOV (TRANSCARPATHIAN OBLAST) IN THE EXTREME SOUTH WESTERN UKRAINE) 0.25 MILLIROENTGENS PER HOUR. THE ISOTOPE COMPOSITION OF THE FALLOUT WAS AS FOLLOWS: WITHIN THE AREA OF THE ACCIDENT, THE ENTIRE TABLE OF CHEMICAL ELEMENTS WAS DETECTABLE. OUTSIDE THE IMMEDIATE AREA, THE MAJOR ELEMENT PRESENT (UP TO 50%) WAS IODINE 131. OTHERS PRESENT WERE CAESIUM 137, IODINE 132, STRONTIUM 89 AND 90, ITRIUM, BARIUM, LANTHANUM, RUTHENIUM 103, TELURIUM 132. NO PERCENTAGE FIGURES FOR THE LATTER WERE GIVEN. WATER RESOURCES WERE GENERALLY SAFE, AND SHOWED NO SIGNIFICANT CHANGES.

8. SEDUNOV'S STATEMENT THAT NO RADIOACTIVE EMISSION BEYOND THE SOVIET BORDERS HAD TAKEN PLACE WAS TAKEN UP IN QUESTIONS BY MY CANADIAN AND SPANISH COLLEAGUES. AFTER SOME RATHER EVASIVE FOOTWORK HE MAINTAINED THAT WHAT HE HAD MEANT WAS THAT NO EMISSIONS WERE NOW TAKING PLACE. EARLIER EMISSIONS HAD NOT BEEN SUBSTANTIAL. WHEN PRESSED AS TO WHETHER THE DATA ON WHICH THE RUSSIANS BASED THIS ASSESSMENT HAD BEEN RECEIVED FROM OTHER AFFECTED COUNTRIES THROUGH BILATERAL CHANNELS OR VIA THE IAEA, SEDUNOV STATED THAT THE ASSESSMENT WAS BASED ON ANALYSIS OF THE BEHAVIOUR OF THE RADIOACTIVE EMISSIONS ON SOVIET TERRITORY, AND THE FACT THAT THE MAJOR PART OF THE FALLOUT HAD BEEN DEPOSITED THERE.

9. THERE HAD BEEN NO CHANGE IN THE GENERAL LEVEL OF RADIATION IN MOSCOW, WHICH COULD BE ATTRIBUTED TO THE NORTHERLY AIR FLOW FOLLOWING THE ACCIDENT.

10. I, AND MY NETHERLANDS AND SWEDISH COLLEAGUES, TOOK THE OPPORTUNITY TO PRESS FOR ANSWERS TO THE SETS OF SPECIFIC TECHNICAL QUESTIONS WE HAD SEPARATELY SUBMITTED. REACTIONS BY THE PANEL WERE DEFENSIVE, TO THE EFFECT THAT ALL AVAILABLE INFORMATION WAS ALREADY BEING GIVEN, BY STATEMENTS IN THE PRESS AS WELL AS THROUGH IAEA. I EXPRESSED THE STRONG HOPE THAT THE INFORMATION GIVEN BY THE RUSSIANS ON THIS OCCASION, USEFUL THOUGH IT HAD BEEN, WOULD NOT BE REGARDED BY THE SOVIET AUTHORITIES AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR DETAILED ANSWERS TO OUR QUESTIONS, WHICH REFLECTED OUR PARTICULAR NATIONAL INTERESTS AND CONCERNS AND WERE NOT SUSCEPTIBLE TO BLANKET TREATMENT. SHCHERBINA, THOUGH MORE FORTHCOMING THAN HIS COLLEAGUES, WOULD NOT GO BEYOND SAYING THAT THE INFORMATION GIVEN TO THE IAEA WAS AVAILABLE TO ALL MEMBER STATES, BUT THAT THE SOVIET AUTHORITIES WERE READY TO ANSWER FURTHER

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DIRECT QUESTIONS, IF THERE WERE ANY. THE SOVIET UNION WOULD MAKE A FULL REPORT TO THE IAEA WHEN IT WAS ITSELF IN POSSESSION OF ALL THE FACTS. THE REPORT WAS EXPECTED TO BE READY IN 'ABOUT JULY'.

HANDLING OF FOOD PRODUCTS

11. RADIOLOGICAL CHECKS WERE BEING MADE ON FOODSTUFFS, INCLUDING GREENS, COMING IN TO MOSCOW. NO CHANGES FROM BACKGROUND LEVEL HAD BEEN MONITORED ON ANY ITEMS. SHCHERBINA HIMSELF STRESSED THAT NO FOODSTUFFS FROM THE ZONE OF CONTAMINATION WERE BEING MARKETED. IN REPLY TO A POINT RAISED BY MY GERMAN COLLEAGUE, HE REITERATED THAT NO MILK WAS BEING MARKETED FROM THAT AREA, BUT THEN SAID THAT ALL THE MILK WOULD BE PROCESSED INTO BUTTER AND CHEESE, AND COULD ONLY BE SOLD 3 MONTHS LATER.

COMMENT

12. BY SOVIET STANDARDS, THIS BRIEFING SESSION WAS A FURTHER SMALL STEP FORWARDS TOWARDS MORE SENSIBLE AND CIVILISED BEHAVIOUR. IT DID PRODUCE SOME NEW INFORMATION, BUT I WAS LEFT WITH THE CLEAR IMPRESSION THAT THE BRIEFING, AND DR. BLIX'S RECENT VISIT, WOULD BE USED BY THE RUSSIANS AS AN EXCUSE FOR NOT PROVIDING ANSWERS TO THE MORE DETAILED QUESTIONS WHICH WE, THE DUTCH, THE SWEDES AND PROBABLY OTHERS, HAVE SUBMITTED: WE SHALL CONTINUE TO PRESS FOR THESE.

13. THE BRIEFING ALSO SHOWED THAT THE QUESTION TO WHICH NO SATISFACTORY ANSWER IS YET FORTHCOMING, AND ON WHICH WE SHOULD FOCUS, IS THAT OF THE DEGREE OF CONTAMINATION OF AGRICULTURAL LAND NORTH AND NORTH-WEST OF CHERNOBYL, ITS LONGEVITY AND ITS POSSIBLE EFFECTS ON THE NEXT GRAIN HARVEST AS WELL AS ON VEGETABLES, FRUIT AND DAIRY PRODUCTS DURING THE COMING MONTHS. IT WOULD BE HELPFUL TO HAVE A LIST OF KEY QUESTIONS, TARGETTED BY EXPERTS, FOR WHICH WE COULD PRESS FOR ANSWERS ON THIS ISSUE.

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14. SHCHERBINA MENTIONED, IN A DEFENSIVE ASIDE, THE ALLEGED NUCLEAR ACCIDENT AT DUNGENESS ON 31 MARCH: COULD WE BE BRIEFED ON THIS ?

CARTLEDGE

SOVIET NUCLEAR ACCIDENT

LIMITED

NED
SOVIET D
WED
EED
MAED
CONS D
NEWS D
INFO D
PUSD
ECD(E)
SED

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

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MR B HAMPTON }

MR M HARRIS } DHSS, HEALTH SERVICES DIV.,
MR RUBERY } HANNIBAL HOUSE.

MR E RIDER } HSE N11, THAMES HSE.STH.
MR S HARBISON }

MR S SEYMOUR, OT3/5C, DTI (VICTORIA ST.,)
MR G MEEKINGS } MAFF
MR R HATHAWAY }

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MR N BURTON BRITISH COUNCIL
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