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FROM MOSCOW 251445Z MARCH

TO PRIORITY F C O

TELEGRAM NUMBER 299 OF 25 MARCH

INFO ROUTINE UKDEL NATO AND WASHINGTON

ANDROPOV'S HEALTH.

1. VARIOUS RUMOURS HAVE BEEN CIRCULATING IN MOSCOW ABOUT ANDROPOV'S HEALTH AND I UNDERSTAND THAT THE TIMES OF 23 MARCH CARRIED ON ITS FRONT PAGE AN AP AGENCY REPORT WHICH SUGGESTS THAT HE IS SERIOUSLY ILL OR EVEN DEAD AND CITING AS EVIDENCE, AMONG OTHER THINGS, MARSHAL USTINOV'S RAPID RETURN TO MOSCOW AFTER HIS VISIT TO HUNGARY ON 22 MARCH. THE CHINESE EMBASSY HAVE BEEN PEDDLING STORIES FOR SOME TIME THAT ANDROPOV'S KIDNEY TROUBLE IS NOW SO BAD THAT HE HAS TO SLEEP IN A POLYCLINIC WHERE HE RECEIVES DAILY TREATMENT SEMICOLON OR HAS CANCER. THEY QUOTE DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER KAPITSA AS HAVING TOLD THEM AT THE BEGINNING OF THE MONTH THAT THERE WOULD BE A MAJOR CEREMONY ON 14 MARCH TO COMMEMORATE THE CENTENARY OF THE DEATH OF MARX AT WHICH ANDROPOV WOULD MAKE AN IMPORTANT SPEECH. IN THE EVENT NO SUCH CEREMONY TOOK PLACE. THERE IS A STORY WHICH WE AND OTHERS HAVE HEARD FROM REFUSENIK SOURCES THAT HE SURVIVED AN ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT IN LATE FEBRUARY. THE LIBYAN LEADER, JALLOUD, WHO WAS HERE LAST WEEK, DID NOT SEE ANDROPOV ALTHOUGH ON A SIMILAR VISIT LAST YEAR HE WAS RECEIVED BY BREZHNEV.

2. IT IS TRUE THAT THE SOVIET LEADER HAS NOT BEEN ON PUBLIC VIEW SINCE 2 MARCH WHEN HE SAW PRESIDENT MACHEL OF MOZAMBIQUE. BUT WE HAVE NOW BEEN ABLE TO CONFIRM REPORTS THAT HE RECEIVED ON 15 MARCH THE DELEGATION OF RULING PARTY CENTRAL COMMITTEE SECRETARIES REPORTED IN MY TELNO 260.

3. RUMOURS ABOUT THE LEADERS' HEALTH AND MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCES ARE ENDEMIC IN MOSCOW. BUT UNLIKE BREZHNEV, ANDROPOV, WHETHER SICK OR IN GOOD HEALTH, APPEARS TO AVOID PUBLICITY. I HOLD TO THE VIEW WHICH IS SHARED BY MY US AND MOST COMMUNITY COLLEAGUES THAT THE AP REPORT IS OFF-BEAM. HAD A SERIOUS LEADERSHIP CRISIS OCCURRED EARLIER THIS WEEK, THE PRIME MINISTER, TIKHONOV, WOULD HAVE RETURNED IMMEDIATELY FROM HIS VISIT TO YUGOSLAVIA. I KNOW OF NO EVIDENCE THAT USTINOV'S VISIT TO BUDAPEST WAS CUT SHORT. ON THE OTHER HAND, THERE IS REASON TO BELIEVE THAT ANDROPOV'S GENERAL HEALTH IS NOT GOOD, AND THAT HE HAS IN THE PAST HAD HEART TROUBLE. THERE ARE ALSO RECENT REPORTS,

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WHICH ARE PROBABLY RELIABLE , THAT HE HAS A KIDNEY COMPLAINT WHICH CALLS FOR FREQUENT TREATMENT. STEVENS, THE VETERAN SUNDAY TIMES AND 'NEWSDAY' CORRESPONDENT (THE FIRST TO REPORT BREZHNEV'S DEATH) TOLD ME IN CONFIDENCE ON 24 MARCH THAT HE HAD IT ON GOOD AUTHORITY THAT ANDROPOV HAD RECENTLY BEEN IN HOSPITAL FOR TREATMENT FOR SOME DAYS. I AM INCLINED TO ACCEPT THIS REPORT , BUT TO DISCOUNT THE MORE DRAMATIC RUMOURS.

4. THERE SHOULD BE A NUMBER OF OCCASIONS IN THE NEAR FUTURE AT WHICH ANDROPOV WOULD NORMALLY BE EXPECTED TO MAKE A PUBLIC APPEARANCE . PEREZ DE CUELLAR IS DUE IN MOSCOW ON 28 MARCH AND COULD BE EXPECTED TO SEE THE SECRETARY GENERAL. HE WOULD ALSO IN NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES BE PRESENT AT THE MEETING WHICH, ACCORDING TO THE YUGOSLAVS HERE , WILL BE HELD ON 30 MARCH TO CELEBRATE THE ANNIVERSARIES OF MARX AND AT WHICH PONONAREV WOULD SPEAK. THIS WOULD BE THE NATIONAL SOVIET CELEBRATION. LOCAL SOURCES AGREE WITH INFORMATION REPORTED BY BERLIN THAT THE MAIN INTERNATIONAL EVENT WILL BE IN EAST BERLIN IN MID-APRIL AND THAT CHERNENKO WILL GO FROM MOSCOW.

SUTHERLAND

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No. 10 DOWNING STREET

THIS TELEGRAM
WAS NOT
ADVANCED

2
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