

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 PRETOR 09782 01 OF 03 261917Z
ACTION NODS-00

INFO OCT-01 ADS-00 /001 W
-----050243 261919Z /44

O 261759Z OCT 79
FM AMEMBASSY PRETORIA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC NIACT IMMEDIATE 6663

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PRETORIA 09782

NODIS

E.O. 12065: RDS-3 10/26/99 (EDMONDSON, W.B.) OR-M
TAGS: MNUC, PARM, SF
SUBJECT: (C) SUSPECTED NUCLEAR EVENT: TALK WITH SOUTH
- AFRICAN FOREIGN MINISTER

REF: (A) STATE 278942, (B) HARROP-EDMONDSON TELECONS
- OF OCTOBER 25/26

1. C - ENTIRE TEXT.

2. SUMMARY: I SAW FOREIGN MINISTER PIK BOTHA WITH FOUR
OF HIS ASSISTANTS EARLY OCTOBER 26, GAVE HIM THE USG
STATEMENT ABOUT THE SUSPECTED NUCLEAR EVENT OF SEPT 22,
EXPLAINED SOME OF THE BACKGROUND, INCLUDING THE APPARENT
DESIRE OF THE SOURCE OF THE LEAKED STORY TO DISCREDIT
THE SALT-TREATY DETECTION SYSTEM, AND SUGGESTED THAT THE
SAG CONSIDER REAFFIRMING THE ASSURANCES ABOUT NUCLEAR
MATTERS THAT THE SAG GAVE US IN 1977. PIK WAS FRIENDLY
AND ATTENTIVE BUT INCLINED TO BLAME US FOR THE ANTI-SOUTH
AFRICAN EMPHASIS OF THE STORY AS WELL AS TO REPEAT HIS
PRESS LINE THAT THE U.S. ONLY GAVE AN IMPRESSION OF
WEAKNESS BY APPEARING "SO NERVOUS" ABOUT THE MATTER. HE
DID NOT RESPOND TO THE IDEA OF REAFFIRMING THE 1977 ASSUR-
ANCES (NOR DID HE PERSONALLY DENY THE POSSIBILITY OF ANY
SAG TESTING), BUT WAS INCLINED EITHER TO RIDICULE THE
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 PRETOR 09782 01 OF 03 261917Z

REPORT OR BLAME IT ON SOME OTHER COUNTRY OR CAUSE. HE
DID INSTRUCT ONE OF HIS PEOPLE TO PASS ON MY REQUEST FOR
ANY INFORMATION THE SAG MIGHT HAVE THAT WOULD HELP US
IDENTIFY AND ASSESS THE EVENT. I EMPHASIZED OUR CAREFUL
HANDLING OF THE INITIAL INDICATIONS AND LEFT HIM IN NO
DOUBT ABOUT THE SERIOUSNESS WITH WHICH WE REGARDED SUCH
MATTERS. END SUMMARY.

3. PER HARROP-EDMONDSON TELECON OCT 26, I CALLED ON SAG FOREIGN MINISTER PIK BOTHA AT 0900 OCTOBER 26 TO DISCUSS NEWS STORIES MENTIONED REF (A) AND TO SUGGEST THAT A REAFFIRMATION OF ASSURANCES THAT FORMER PRIME MINISTER VORSTER GAVE PRESIDENT CARTER ON NUCLEAR TESTING IN AUGUST 1977 MIGHT BE HELPFUL BOTH TO SAG AND OTHERS AT THIS TIME. BOTHA RECEIVED ME IN THE COMPANY OF FOUR DFA ASSISTANTS. SINCE THE NEWS STORY, IMPLYING THAT USG HAD SUGGESTED THAT SOUTH AFRICA MAY HAVE TESTED A NUCLEAR DEVICE, HAD ALREADY BEEN ON LOCAL SABC BROADCAST ALONG WITH COMMENT BY PIK BOTHA DENYING ANY KNOWLEDGE OF ANY TEST AND COMPLAINING THAT AMERICANS SHOULD BE SURE OF THEIR FACTS BEFORE MAKING ANY STATEMENTS, I BEGAN BY SAYING THAT THE USG HAD MADE NO ACCUSATIONS. PIK SAID HE KNEW THIS; THEN READ WITH INTEREST THE U.S. STATEMENT AS CONTAINED IN PARA 3 REF (A), AND LISTENED CAREFULLY AS I DREW ON THE REST OF GUIDANCE TO EXPLAIN THAT THE EVIDENCE REMAINED AMBIGUOUS AND THAT WE HAD NOT BEEN ABLE TO CORROBORATE ITS NATURE OR ORIGIN, OR CONFIRM DEFINITELY THAT A NUCLEAR EVENT TOOK PLACE.

4. I SAID THAT INDICATIONS PLACED THE TIME OF THE EVENT SHORTLY BEFORE 0100 GMT ON SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, AND WHEN PIK EXPRESSED CONFUSION ABOUT THE TIMING OF GMT, I EXPLAINED THAT IT WOULD HAVE BEEN BETWEEN TWO OR THREE HOURS AFTER FRIDAY MIDNIGHT ON THE NIGHT OF SEPTEMBER 21/22. I DEFINED CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 PRETOR 09782 01 OF 03 261917Z

THE AREA AS ONE APPARENTLY CENTERED FAIRLY WELL SOUTH IN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC ENCOMPASSING MOST OF THE SOUTH ATLANTIC, A PORTION OF ANTARCTICA, THE SOUTHERN PART OF AFRICA, INCLUDING SOUTH AFRICA, AND THE SOUTHWESTERN PORTION OF THE INDIAN OCEAN. WHEN PIK SUGGESTED THAT MAYBE IT WAS NEAR AUSTRALIA OR NEW ZEALAND, I SAID I UNDERSTOOD THAT WAS TOO FAR EAST; WHEN HE SUGGESTED IT MIGHT BE CHILE, I SAID THAT APPEARED TOO FAR WEST. LATER, WHEN HE SUGGESTED THAT MAYBE THE RUSSIANS SHOULD BE BLAMED, I SAID WE WERE NOT "BLAMING" ANYONE AND THAT I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE UNWISE TO DO SO.

5. WHEN I SAID INDICATIONS WERE INCONCLUSIVE BUT CONSISTENT WITH A LOW-YIELD NUCLEAR EXPLOSION IN THE SURFACE OR NEAR-SURFACE ATMOSPHERE, HE ASKED WHAT WAS MEANT BY "LOW-YIELD," AND I SAID THAT I UNDERSTOOD THIS TERM COULD MEAN SOMETHING ANYWHERE IN THE RANGE FROM 1 OR 1.5 TO 3 OR EVEN 4 KILOTONS, BUT THAT THESE WERE SCIENTIFIC DETAILS I WAS NEITHER INFORMED NOR KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT. (HE ASKED WHAT A KILOTON WAS IN TERMS OF COMPARISON WITH HIROSHIMA, BUT I DEFERRED TO THE EXPERTS.)

6. I MENTIONED THAT THE LEAK ABOUT THESE INDICATIONS WAS REGRETTABLE BUT APPEARED TO BE INTENDED TO CREATE PRESSURE

AGAINST THE SALT AGREEMENT BY IMPLYING A PROBLEM WITH DETECTION SYSTEMS (DESPITE THE FACT THAT SALT DETECTION SYSTEMS WERE APPARENTLY QUITE SEPARATE AND DIFFERENT FROM WHAT WAS INVOLVED IN THIS INSTANCE). I ADDED THAT THE MEDIA SEEMED TO BE PLAYING UP THE SOUTH AFRICAN ANGLE BECAUSE SOUTH AFRICA WAS THE ONLY COUNTRY WITH ANY NUCLEAR-ENRICHMENT CAPABILITY IN THE AREA INVOLVED. PIK TOOK SMALL COMFORT IN THIS AND BEGAN TO COMPLAIN ABOUT THE U.S. POINT-

CONFIDENTIAL

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CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 PRETOR 09782 02 OF 03 261918Z
ACTION NODS-00

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 03 PRETORIA 09782

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ING A FINGER AT SOUTH AFRICA, TO WHICH I RESPONDED BY AGAIN EMPHASIZING (A) THAT WE HAD MADE NO ACCUSATIONS, AND (B) THAT OUR STATEMENT MADE VERY CLEAR THAT WE HAD RECEIVED NO CORROBORATION OF THE SUSPECTED EVENT.

7. AGAIN NOTING THE MEDIA ATTENTION TO SOUTH AFRICA, I SAID THAT SINCE THERE WAS A NEW, YEAR-OLD ADMINISTRATION IN SOUTH AFRICA, I WOULD SUGGEST THAT IT WOULD BE USEFUL (TO THEM, TO US, AND TO OTHERS PERHAPS) IF PRIME MINISTER P.W. BOTHA COULD CONSIDER RESTATING OR REAFFIRMING THE NUCLEAR ASSURANCES THAT THE PREVIOUS PRIME MINISTER (VORSTER) GAVE TO PRESIDENT CARTER IN AUGUST 1977. PIK MADE NO DIRECT REPLY TO THIS EXCEPT TO NOTE THAT THE PRIME MINISTER WAS IN CAPE TOWN FOR A QUIET WEEKEND. PIK SAID HE HAD SPOKEN TO P.W. ON THE PHONE, BUT IMPLIED THAT HE (PIK) WAS LEAVING FOR SOMEPLACE HIMSELF VERY SOON AND WOULD NOT SEE OR TALK TO P.W. AGAIN UNTIL SOMETIME LATER.

8. I REINFORCED MY POINT A BIT BY RECALLING THAT ON SEPT 27 I HAD ASKED FOREIGN AFFAIRS SECRETARY BRAND FOURIE ABOUT PRIME MINISTER BOTHA'S STATEMENT TO THE CAPE NATIONAL PARTY CONGRESS, ON SEPTEMBER 25, THAT SOUTH AFRICA HAD WEAPONS TO

FIGHT TERRORISM AND THAT IF ANYONE THOUGHT OF TRYING SOMETHING ELSE, THEY MIGHT FIND THAT SOUTH AFRICA HAD WEAPONS THAT ARE NOT KNOWN ABOUT. PIK IMMEDIATELY INTERJECTED THAT CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 PRETOR 09782 02 OF 03 261918Z

THE PRIME MINISTER WAS REFERRING TO CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS. I REPLIED THAT, YES, THIS IS WHAT BRAND TOLD ME BUT IN VIEW OF MEDIA SPECULATION AT THE TIME THAT P.W. WAS POSSIBLY HINTING AT NUCLEAR WEAPONS (SPECULATION WHICH WAS NOT SPECIFICALLY SCOTCHED SUBSEQUENTLY), THIS SEEMED TO ME ALL THE MORE REASON ONE MIGHT SEE VALUE IN REAFFIRMING THE 1977 ASSURANCES.

9. PIK THEN ASKED IF THE U.S. DID NOT RUN THE RISK OF APPEARING WEAK BY BEING SO NERVOUS OVER SUCH A MATTER; THE U.S. SHOULD NOT PANIC SO EASILY. I RATHER FIRMLY REMINDED HIM THAT THE USG HAD NOT ORIGINATED THIS STORY; IT WAS A LEAK BEING GIVEN UNDERSTANDABLY DRAMATIC COVERAGE BY A FREE PRESS. I SAID THAT HE SHOULD KNOW THAT DESPITE THE SOUTH AFRICAN ANGLE OF THE STORY, WE HAD APPARENTLY LEARNED FROM A RELIABLE JOURNALIST, WHO OBVIOUSLY COULD NOT IDENTIFY THE SOURCE, THAT THE LEAK CAME FROM SOMEONE WHO WANTED TO DISCREDIT THE SALT TREATY DETECTION SYSTEMS. MOREOVER, I SAID, THE USG HAD DEALT RESPONSIBLY WITH THE INDICATIONS WE HAD AT THE TIME OF THE EVENT, WITHHOLDING ANY PUBLIC STATEMENT AND CONTINUING THE CAREFUL PROCESS OF REVIEWING AND ASSESSING ALL AVAILABLE EVIDENCE BEFORE MAKING ANY JUDGMENT. I ASSURED HIM, HOWEVER, THAT WE REGARDED ANY POSSIBLE NUCLEAR EVENT WITH UTMOST SERIOUSNESS SINCE THESE WERE MATTERS OF WORLDWIDE CONCERN.

10. PIK ASKED WHY WE HAD NOT TOLD THE SAG OF THE SUSPECTED EVENT WHEN WE FIRST RECEIVED INDICATIONS OF IT. I SAID THAT AS FAR AS I KNEW, WE HAD NOT CONSULTED WITH ANY OTHER GOVERNMENT EXCEPT OUR VERY CLOSEST ALLY (BRITAIN) SIMPLY BECAUSE WE HAD NOT HAD SUFFICIENTLY CONCLUSIVE INDICATIONS TO DO SO. I ASSUMED THIS WAS A MATTER OF JUDGMENT IN A HIGHLY TECHNICAL FIELD ON WHICH I HAD NO COMPETENCE TO CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 PRETOR 09782 02 OF 03 261918Z

COMMENT. I SAID WE WERE CONTINUING TO SEEK INFORMATION ABOUT THE SUSPECTED SEPTEMBER 22 EVENT AND WOULD BE MOST GRATEFUL IF SAG COULD OFFER ANYTHING AT ALL THAT THEY THOUGHT COULD BE HELPFUL TO US. PIK INSTRUCTED RAY KILLEN TO CHECK WITH THE ATOMIC ENERGY BOARD AND THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE TO SEE IF THEY MIGHT HAVE ANYTHING TO OFFER.

11. PIK WONDERED IF THE SOVIETS WERE AWARE OF THE SUSPECTED EVENT, SINCE THEY WERE THE FIRST TO CALL ATTENTION TO THE KALAHARI "BOREHOLES" ABOUT WHICH CONCERN WAS EXPRESSED IN 1977. I SAID I DID NOT KNOW. HE THEN ASKED IF THE RUSSIANS COULD HAVE SET OFF A DEVICE OR IF OUR SENSORS COULD HAVE PICKED UP SOME NATURAL PHENOMENON. I SAID OTHER COUNTRY ACTIVITY MIGHT THEORETICALLY BE POSSIBLE; ONE MIGHT SPECULATE ABOUT A NUUBER OF POSSIBILITIES; I DID NOT KNOW IF THE SENSORS COULD BE AFFECTED BY NATURAL PHENOMENA, BUT UNDERSTOOD THAT THEY WERE NOT KNOWN EVER TO HAVE BEEN INACCURATE. (BOTH COMMENTED THAT U.S. MILITARY PERSONNEL, PRESUMABLY IN WASHINGTON, HAD ADMITTED THAT NATURAL PHENOMENA COULD NOT BE EXCLUDED EVEN THOUGH THE INDICATIONS WOULD MORE PROBABLY STEM FROM A NUCLEAR EVENT.)

12. PIK ASKED TOWARD THE END IF THE USG THOUGHT THE RUSSIANS WOULD EVER CHANGE OR GIVE UP THEIR GOAL OF (WORLD) DOMINATION. I SAID HE PROBABLY DID NOT HAVE TIME FOR A FULL PHILOSOPHICAL REPLY TO HIS QUESTION, BUT REGARDLESS OF CURRENT AND NEAR-TERM SOVIET AIMS, I HAD GREAT CONFIDENCE IN THE STRENGTH AND ADVANTAGES OF THE WEST, PARTICULARLY THE U.S.; I FELT WE WERE STRONG POLITICALLY AND IDEOLOGICALLY AS WELL AS ECONOMICALLY AND MILITARILY. WE DO NOT UNDERESTIMATE THE THREAT OR REALITY OF SOVIET POWER, BUT THE COMMUNIST WORLD HAS MANY WEAKNESSES COMPARED WITH THE

CONFIDENTIAL

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CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 PRETOR 09782 03 OF 03 261923Z
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TO SECSTATE WASHDC NIACT IMMEDIATE 6665

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 03 OF 03 PRETORIA 09782

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WEST AND IS NO LONGER COMPLETELY MONOLITHIC. OUR RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND RECOGNITION OF THE FORCE OF NATIONALISM, SPECIFICALLY AFRICAN NATIONALISM, GIVES US AN ADVANTAGE, PROVIDED WE ALSO RECOGNIZE AND DEAL WITH THE PROBLEMS THAT ATTRACT SOME INDIVIDUALS TO THE EMPTY BUT POWER-BACKED

IDEOLOGY OF MARXISM.

13. COMMENT: AS I ROSE TO LEAVE, I REPEATED THAT AN OFFICIAL SAG REAFFIRMATION OF THE 1977 ASSURANCES WOULD BE A USEFUL STEP WHICH THEY SHOULD CONSIDER. BOTHA DID NOT PICK UP ON THIS, AND I NOTE FROM THE AFTERNOON PAPERS THAT HE TOLD A TV INTERVIEWER SOON AFTER I LEFT THAT AMERICA "SHOULD ACCEPT, CALMLY AND COURAGEOUSLY, THEIR ROLE AS AN ANTI-MARXIST STATE AND NOT GET SCARED SO EASILY." ALTHOUGH AEB CHAIRMAN DE VILLIERS CATEGORICALLY DENIED TO THE PRESS THAT SOUTH AFRICA MIGHT HAVE CONDUCTED A NUCLEAR TEST, PIK BOTHA HAS STILL NOT ISSUED A SPECIFIC DENIAL. RATHER, HE APPEARS TO HAVE CHOSEN TO RIDICULE THE POSSIBLE EVENT ("MAYBE THEY SAW THE REBIRTH OF VENUS") AND THUS AVOID DESTROYING THE HINT THAT THE SAG MIGHT INDEED HAVE A NUCLEAR EXPLOSIVE CAPABILITY ABOUT WHICH THE U.S. IS NERVOUS. IN THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, IT MAY BE EXPECTING A GREAT DEAL TO ASK THE SAG TO VOLUNTEER ANY REAFFIRMATION OF THE ASSURANCES GIVEN US BY VORSTER IN 1977.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 PRETOR 09782 03 OF 03 261923Z

14. CORRECTION: INSERT "SOUTH AFRICAN TIME" FOLLOWING WORD "MIDNIGHT" IN 5TH LINE OF PARA 4. EDMONDSON

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Message Attributes

Automatic DecapTIONing: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: NUCLEAR EXPLOSIONS, NUCLEAR TESTS, DIPLOMATIC DISCUSSIONS, NEWS LEAKS, SALT (ARMS CONTROL), GOVERNMENT REACTIONS, CAT-C
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Draft Date: 26 oct 1979
DecapTION Date: 20 Mar 2014
DecapTION Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
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From: PRETORIA OR-M
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TAGS: MNUC, PARM, SOPN, SF, XO, UR, (BOTH, PIK)
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