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Alleged Biological Warfare Agent Incident at Sverdlovsk

U Intelligence information reports and allegations of Soviet involvement in offensive biological weapons development have been received by the Intelligence Community sporadically since World War II. Sources of the allegations have ranged from low level defectors to high-level Soviet academicians. Most of the information has come from overt literature and human intelligence sources.

U In April 1979, an accident occurred in Sverdlovsk, probably at a military installation long suspected of being engaged in research and development of biological warfare agents. The accident resulted in an extraordinary outbreak of disease, probably pulmonary anthrax, causing 200-300 deaths. The number of deaths and the virulence of the disease were significant enough to force the Soviets to impose a quarantine in the area. In contrast to natural epidemics where all available public health resources are used, the Soviets employed military forces almost exclusively to effect control and concealed the exact nature of the outbreak.

U The release of large quantities, (estimated at tens of kilograms), of anthrax spores, a candidate biological warfare agent, would explain the large number of deaths,, difficulties in controlling the disease, limited effectiveness of treatment and prophylaxis, the need for decontaminating buildings, the clinical findings characteristic of pulmonary anthrax and the associated military security.

U Certain compelling circumstantial evidence indicates that the Soviets have maintained an active biological warfare program at the Sverdlovsk facility since at least 1972. It cannot be determined, however, when the released agent was produced or if the agent was stored in bulk or in a munition but it is obviously more than the quantities needed for peaceful or defensive research purposes.

U The Biological and Chemical Warfare Working Group, Weapon and Space Systems Intelligence Committee has reviewed all available intelligence to determine if a reported disease outbreak did occur. It concluded that there is a high probability that the Soviets still have some anthrax for biological warfare purposes and it is possible that they still have an active biological warfare agent program at this Sverdlovsk facility.

U The evidence indicates that the Soviets are probably in violation of the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention.

(U) The US State Department has on 5 occasions, formally requested a Soviet explanation of the Sverdlovsk incident. The responses have all stated that the incident has nothing to do with the Biological Weapons Convention. The UK has also requested a formal explanation and received the same response.

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