

U.S. Officials Acted Hastily In Nuclear Test Accusation

CIA Hesitates to Call Russian 'Event' a Quake

By R. Jeffrey Smith, Washington Post Staff Writer
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A high-priority, classified alert issued by the CIA on Aug. 18 quickly caught the eye of senior U.S. policymakers. The bulletin came from the government's Nuclear Test Intelligence Committee, an interagency scientific group, and said that Russia probably had conducted a nuclear test two days earlier on an island near the Arctic Circle.

Officials at the National Security Council swung into action, convening an interagency meeting two days later and ordering a full-court press to collect an explanation from Moscow. The Russian ambassador was summoned to hear a strong complaint at the State Department, and the senior U.S. diplomat in Moscow issued a similar demarche at the Foreign Ministry there.

Although the government kept the report secret, the NSC prepared a statement to be read in case of a leak, which said, "We do have information that a seismic event with explosive characteristics occurred in the vicinity of the Russian nuclear test range" on the island of Novaya Zemlya. When the statement was eventually released on Aug. 27, it raised dark suspicions around the world that Moscow had challenged the nuclear test ban treaty.

There was only one problem: The CIA's report about the location of the "event" was wrong, according to various U.S. intelligence and defense officials, independent scientific experts, and the British, Norwegian and French governments. The event actually occurred roughly 80 miles at sea and, these officials and experts now say, was almost certainly an earthquake.

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"U.S. Formally Drops Claim Of Possible Nuclear Blast

Turnabout Ends Dispute Over Alleged Russian Weapon Test"

By R. Jeffrey Smith

Washington Post Staff Writer

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The CIA and the White House have formally dropped their claim that a seismic disturbance in the vicinity of a Russian nuclear test site in the Arctic Circle may have been caused by a nuclear explosion, ending a disagreement within the government over whether Russia had illicitly tested a nuclear weapon Aug. 16, senior officials said yesterday.

The administration's turnabout came after four independent experts who were appointed by CIA Director George J. Tenet to review the agency's controversial analysis of the seismic event concluded in a brief, classified report to him last week that the disturbance "almost certainly" was not caused by a nuclear explosion, intelligence officials said.

The CIA had initially reported to the White House within a few days of the event that it was likely caused by an explosion at the test site, sowing wide alarm and prompting the administration to register a stiff complaint in Moscow....

CIA STATEMENT FOR USE IN RESPONSE TO QUERY
4 November 1997

REVIEW OF ACTIVITY AND EVENTS RELATED TO RUSSIAN
NUCLEAR TEST SITE ON NOVAYA ZEMLYA

The nature of ongoing activities at the Russian nuclear test site on Novaya Zemlya, and the August 16, 1997, seismic event in the vicinity of the test site, are issues of continuing high concern within the US intelligence and policy communities.

In response to questions posed both inside and outside the government, Director of Central Intelligence George J. Tenet recently convened a panel of experts to review all of the available intelligence and technical data on the August events, its subsequent analysis, and the process associated with the dissemination of the Intelligence Community's judgments to policymakers and the Congress. Members of the panel were: Richard Kerr, former Deputy Director of Central Intelligence; Sidney Drell, a Stanford University physicist and member of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board; Roger Hagengruber, vice president of Sandia National Laboratory; and Eugene Herrin, a Southern Methodist University physicist.

The panel concurred in the CIA's assessment that nuclear weapons-related experiments were conducted by the Russians at Novaya Zemlya in mid-August 1997.

During the same time frame that the weapons related experiments were being conducted, a seismic event occurred on August 16, 1997, in the Kara Sea. That seismic event was almost certainly not associated with the activities at Novaya Zemlya and was not nuclear. However, from the seismic data, experts cannot say with certainty whether the Kara Sea event was an explosion or an earthquake.

The panel indicated that these incidents -- the activity at the test site and the coincident seismic event in the Kara Sea -- demonstrate the difficulty of accurately identifying and assessing weapons experiments or tests with very low yields. In analyzing the seismic events in August 16, 1997, the Intelligence Community responded within the same timelines expected by the policy community for monitoring any possible nuclear test. These timelines are relatively short and dependent on pre-existing intelligence and rapid analysis procedures. Further, more detailed, analysis during the ensuing weeks led CIA to the conclusion that the activities at the test site and the seismic event were apparently not connected.