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SUBJECT= VISIT OF MATTHEW MESELSON TO STUDY THE CAUSES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE 1979 ANTHRAX OUTBREAK IN SVERDLOVSK

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TAGS= PARM, OTRA, TBIO, RS, US, (MESELSON, MATTHEW)

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ACTION EUR-01

INFO LOG-00 ACDA-15 AID-01 AMAD-01 CIAE-00 CFE-01 C-01
DODE-00 DOEE-00 CISA-02 H-01 INRE-00 INR-01 L-03
ADS-00 NRRC-01 NSAE-00 NSCE-00 OES-09 PA-01 PM-01
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E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
TAGS: PARM, CBW, RS, US
SUBJECT: VISIT OF MATTHEW MESELSON TO STUDY THE
CAUSES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE 1979
ANTHRAX OUTBREAK IN SVERDLOVSK

1. SUMMARY: ON 17 JUNE, HARVARD PROFESSOR MATTHEW
MESELSON, ACCOMPANIED BY A GROUP OF ACADEMICS,
COMPLETED A VISIT TO EKATERINBURG TO STUDY THE 1979
ANTHRAX OUTBREAK THERE. ACCORDING TO MESELSON, THE
GROUP OBTAINED NEW EVIDENCE THAT THE OUTBREAK WAS
CAUSED BY THE INHALATION OF ANTHRAX. MESELSON
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REPORTED THAT, AFTER AN INITIALLY WARM GREETING,
TOWARDS THE END OF THEIR VISIT THE GROUP WAS
CONSISTENTLY STONEWALLED IN ATTEMPTS TO GET
APPOINTMENTS WITH RELEVANT OFFICIALS. MESELSON ASKED
THAT THE USG TREAT THE INFORMATION HE PROVIDED AS
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2. ON 16 JUNE, POLOFFS MET WITH HARVARD UNIVERSITY
PROFESSOR OF BIOCHEMISTRY MATTHEW MESELSON AND A TEAM
OF ACADEMICS WHO ARE STUDYING THE 1979 ANTHRAX
OUTBREAK IN SVERDLOVSK (NOW EKATERINBURG).
ACCOMPANYING THE GROUP WAS DR. OLGA YAMPOLSKAYA WHO
WORKED IN THE INTENSIVE CARE UNIT OF SVERDLOVSK
HOSPITAL #40 AT THE TIME OF THE OUTBREAK. THE
OBJECTIVE OF THE VISIT WAS TO FIND RELIABLE
INFORMATION REGARDING EPIDEMIOLOGICAL AND MEDICAL
ASPECTS OF THE OUTBREAK.

3. MESELSON'S TRIP WAS ORGANIZED AT HIS OWN INITIATIVE AFTER HE READ IN THE PRESS ABOUT PRESIDENT YEL'TSIN'S ORDER PROHIBITING ACTIVITIES WHICH VIOLATED THE BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS CONVENTION. HE HAD FIRST APPROACHED PRESIDENTIAL COUNCILLOR FOR ECOLOGY AND PUBLIC HEALTH ALEKSEY YABLOKOV, REQUESTING PERMISSION TO VISIT EKATERINBURG TO CONDUCT FURTHER RESEARCH ON THE ANTHRAX OUTBREAK. YABLOKOV RESPONDED THAT THERE WAS NO PURPOSE IN DISTURBING THE "SKELETONS IN THE CLOSET." MESELSON THEN OBTAINED SPONSORSHIP BY THE INSTITUTE OF MOLECULAR GENETICS IN MOSCOW AND A.M. GORKY UNIVERSITY IN EKATERINBURG. MESELSON'S GROUP AGREED AMONG THEMSELVES AND WITH THE

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DIRECTOR OF THE UNIVERSITY THAT NO ONE WOULD TALK TO THE PRESS ABOUT THEIR FINDINGS UNTIL THEY WERE PUBLISHED. HE ASKED THAT THE EMBASSY RESPECT THIS RESTRICTION ON THE INFORMATION HE WAS PROVIDING.

4. MESELSON'S GROUP, WHICH WAS IN EKATERINBURG FROM JUNE 4-14, CONCLUDED FROM THE STUDY OF PATHOLOGICAL FINDINGS OF 42 OF THE VICTIMS OF THE OUTBREAK THAT ALL OF THESE VICTIMS HAD EXTENSIVE MEDIASTINAL DAMAGE AND DIED OF INHALATION ANTHRAX. A PATHOLOGIST IN THE MESELSON GROUP INFORMED POLOFFS THAT DURING THE VISIT, THE GROUP WAS SHOWN PICTURES OF MEDIASTINAL DAMAGE IN MOST OF THE VICTIMS. ACCORDING TO THE PATHOLOGIST, THIS WAS VERY IMPORTANT BECAUSE THE ONLY PREVIOUSLY AVAILABLE PICTURES HAD SHOWN ONLY INTESTINAL, BUT NOT MEDIASTINAL DAMAGE IN THE VICTIMS. THE PATHOLOGIST ALSO NOTED TWO PECULIARITIES ABOUT HIS STUDY OF THE REMAINS OF THESE VICTIMS. FIRST OF ALL, 39 OF THE VICTIMS ALSO HAD INTESTINAL DAMAGE WHICH COULD BE ATTRIBUTED TO ANTHRAX POISONING. SECONDLY, THE ANTHRAX HAD SPREAD THROUGH THE BLOODSTREAM TO THE BRAIN LINING. THE PATHOLOGIST NOTED THAT THIS COULD BE SYMPTOMATIC OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL FACTOR THAT HAD ALTERED THE RESISTANCE OF SOME PEOPLE IN THE LOCAL POPULATION. THE PATHOLOGIST STATED THAT WHILE THIS WAS UNUSUAL, THERE WAS NO DOUBT IN HIS MIND THAT THEY HAD ALL DIED OF INHALATIONAL ANTHRAX.

5. MESELSON INFORMED POLOFFS THAT THE GROUP WAS GIVEN, TOWARDS THE END OF THE TRIP, AN OFFICIAL LIST,

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WITH ADDRESSES, OF THOSE WHOSE FAMILIES WILL RECEIVE
COMPENSATION FROM THE GOVERNMENT. THIS WAS THE
ORIGINAL LIST MADE UP IN 1979. THE GROUP ALSO WENT
TO SECTION 14 OF THE EKATERINBURG CEMETARY WHERE THEY
FOUND CLOSE TO 64 NAMES OF VICTIMS OF THE OUTBREAK.
FROM INFORMATION GATHERED, THEY WERE ABLE TO LOCATE
AND INTERVIEW 25 FAMILIES OF VICTIMS. WITH THE
EXCEPTION OF ONE ELDERLY WOMAN WHO REFUSED TO OPEN
THE DOOR, THE PEOPLE THEY ENCOUNTERED WERE VERY
OPEN. A SOCIOLOG
IST IN THE GROUP NOTED THAT THE
POPULATION WAS WELL AWARE OF THE FACT THAT MOST BLAME
THE ANTHRAX OUTBREAK ON AN ESCAPE OF ORGANISMS FROM A
MILITARY COMPLEX (COMPOUND 19) LOCATED IN THE
NEIGHBORHOOD WHERE ALL THE ACKNOWLEDGED VICTIMS
LIVED, ALTHOUGH THE MAJORITY OF DEATH CERTIFICATES
PRESENTED WHEN THEY CONDUCTED THESE INTERVIEWS CITED
SEPSIS AS THE CAUSE OF DEATH. THE SOCIOLOGIST ALSO
STATED THAT THE MOST LASTING IMPRESSION THAT SHE HAD
FROM THESE INTERVIEWS WAS THE LOCAL POPULATION'S
HOSTILITY TOWARD -- EVEN HATRED OF -- THE MILITARY.
SHE ALSO INFORMED POLOFFS THAT MOST WERE AWARE THAT
RUSSIAN PRESIDENT YEL'TSIN HAD PROMISED TO PAY
COMPENSATION TO THE FAMILIES OF VICTIMS BY MAY 1 OF
THIS YEAR, YET NOTHING HAS SO FAR BEEN RECEIVED.

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ACTION EUR-01

INFO LOG-00 COR-01 ACDA-15 AID-01 AMAD-01 CIAE-00 CFE-01
C-01 DODE-00 DOEE-00 CISA-02 H-01 INRE-00 INR-01
L-03 ADS-00 NRRC-01 NSAE-00 NSCE-00 OES-09 PA-01
PM-01 PRS-01 P-01 SDEL-01 SNP-01 DSC-01 SP-01
SS-01 T-01 USIE-00 /048W

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FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 02 MOSCOW 17968

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6. IN TERMS OF STATISTICS, MESELSON STATED THAT IN THE 42 CASES THEY EXAMINED, THERE WERE NO DEATHS UNDER THE AGE OF 21 AND THAT THE AVERAGE AGE OF THE WOMEN THAT DIED WAS HIGHER THAN THAT OF THE MEN. HOWEVER, MORE MEN DIED OF THE OUTBREAK THAN WOMEN.

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MESELSON ALSO SHOWED POLOFFS A MAP ON WHICH WERE PLOTTED CONFIRMED ADDRESSES OF VICTIMS, ALL OF WHICH WERE IN THE SAME NEIGHBORHOOD AS COMPOUND 19 AND A CERAMICS FACTORY. (NOTE: THE MAP ONLY PLOTTED THE ADDRESSES OF 12 OF THE VICTIMS. THE OFFICIAL DEATH TOLL WAS 64.)

7. THE GROUP ALSO HOPED TO COLLECT INFORMATION REGARDING VETERINARY PRACTICES AND OUTBREAKS OF ANIMAL ANTHRAX IN SVERDLOVSK AT THE TIME OF THE OUTBREAK. UNFORTUNATELY, THEY WERE NOT ABLE TO OBTAIN ANY VALIDATED DATA ON THIS SUBJECT. OF ALL THE PEOPLE INTERVIEWED, NO ONE HAD KNOWLEDGE OF ANY LARGE-SCALE DEATHS OF ANIMALS DURING THE ANTHRAX OUTBREAK OF 1979. HOWEVER, HEARSAY INDICATED THAT SUSPECT MEAT HAD BEEN BURNED AT THE LOCAL CERAMICS FACTORY. THE GROUP'S EFFORTS TO OBTAIN SUCH INFORMATION WERE HAMPERED BY THE FACT THAT THEY WERE NOT ABLE TO MEET WITH ANY VETERINARIANS DURING THEIR VISIT.

8. THE GROUP CONCLUDED THEIR BRIEFING BY RECALLING THE CHANGE IN ATMOSPHERE THAT TOOK PLACE DURING THE VISIT. WHILE THE GROUP WAS ESSENTIALLY WELCOMED WITH OPEN ARMS AT THE INCEPTION OF THEIR VISIT, IT APPEARED THAT SOMEONE LOWERED THE BOOM ON THE VISIT AS TIME PASSED. THIS WAS CLEARLY EVIDENT TOWARDS THE END OF THE VISIT, WHEN THEY HAD DIFFICULTY SCHEDULING ANY MEETINGS AND WERE EVEN DENIED PREVIOUSLY ARRANGED FOLLOW-UP MEETINGS WITH SOME INDIVIDUALS WHO HAD MET

WITH THEM EARLIER DURING THE VISIT. EVIDENCE OF THIS
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WAS THE REFUSAL OF AN OFFICIAL IN THE YAROSLAVL
REGION OF EKATERINBURG TO MEET WITH THE GROUP AND THE
FACT THAT THEY WERE "FORCEFULLY" PROHIBITED FROM
GOING TO SISERTSKIY RAYON. THEY HAD WANTED TO VISIT
THIS AREA BECAUSE OF HEARSAY THAT INDICATED THAT
THERE HAD BEEN A NUMBER OF ANIMAL DEATHS IN THIS AREA
DURING THE TIME OF THE OUTBREAK. THE MESELSON GROUP
ALSO POINTED OUT THAT IT WAS NEVER ALLOWED TO OBTAIN
ANY APPOINTMENTS WITH VETERINARIANS, EVEN DURING THE
EARLY DAYS OF THE VISIT WHEN THEY WERE HAVING LITTLE
TROUBLE SCHEDULING APPOINTMENTS.

9. MESELSON ADDED THAT HIS GROUP HAD NOT BEEN ABLE
TO MEET WITH ANY MILITARY OFFICIALS ON THIS TRIP. HE
DID NOTE THAT GENERAL ANATOLIY KHARECHKO, THE CURRENT
HEAD OF COMPOUND 19, INFORMED MESELSON THAT HE HAD
NOT RECEIVED PERMISSION FROM MOSCOW TO PARTICIPATE IN
SUCH A MEETING. KHARECHKO, HOWEVER, SUGGESTED THAT A
CONFERENCE BE ORGANIZED BETWEEN U.S. AND RUSSIAN
EXPERTS ON THIS SUBJECT IN THE NEAR FUTURE (ACCORDING
TO MESELSON, THIS SUGGESTION WAS CONTAINED IN A
WRITTEN RESPONSE FROM KHARECHKO TO MESELSON'S INITIAL
REQUEST FOR A MEETING). MESELSON SAID THAT HE WOULD
FOLLOW UP ON THIS SUGGESTION AND INFORM THE EMBASSY
SHOULD SUCH A MEETING COME TO PASS. MESELSON ALSO
NOTED TO POLOFFS THAT THERE IS CURRENTLY A POLITICAL
TUG OF WAR UNDERWAY OVER COMPOUND 19. ACCORDING TO
MESELSON, CITY AUTHORITIES WANT TO TAKE CONTROL OF
THE COMPOUND FOR NON-MILITARY PURPOSES, WHILE THE
MILITARY IS REFUSING TO GIVE UP THE COMPOUND,
PRIMARILY BECAUSE OF HOUSING LOCATE

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D ON THE PREMISES.

10. MESELSON SAID HE AND HIS COLLEAGUES PLANNED TO
BRIEF ACDA AND EUR/ISCA UPON THEIR RETURN TO
WASHINGTON.
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