

DoD News Briefing: Secretary of Defense William J. Perry, et al**Presenters: Secretary of Defense William J. Perry, et al
November 23, 1994**

Secretary Perry: Good morning.

I would like to talk to you today about a success story in counter-proliferation. This effort resulted in a joint and very constructive team of the Department of Defense, the Department of Energy, Department of State, and the government of Kazakhstan. Therefore, I have with me Secretary [Warren] Christopher [Secretary of State], Secretary [Hazel] O'Leary [Secretary of Energy], the Ambassador of Kazakhstan, Ambassador Suleymenov, and the American Ambassador to Kazakhstan, Ambassador Courtney.

Yesterday the Department of Defense and the Department of Energy completed a high priority, extremely sensitive mission which we called Project Sapphire, intended to help stem the spread of nuclear weapons and material.

We have just transferred approximately 600 kilograms of weapons grade highly enriched uranium out of Kazakhstan at the request of the government of Kazakhstan, and delivered the material to the Department of Energy's Y-12 plant in Oak Ridge in Tennessee for safe and secure storage. In other words we have just placed in safe hands enough nuclear material from the former Soviet arsenal to make more than 20 nuclear devices. In fact, some of this material was in a form that could be used directly to make nuclear weapons.

By removing it from the Ulba Metallurgical Facility in Kazakhstan where it was stored, and placing it at the Y-12 plant, we have put this bomb-grade nuclear material forever out of the reach of potential black marketeers, terrorists, or a new nuclear regime.

Project Sapphire was made possible by the Nunn/Lugar threat reduction program which was designed to help former Soviet states dismantle the Cold War nuclear arsenal and infrastructure that is still on their territories. This is a tremendous success story for the Nunn/Lugar program.

Both the United States and Kazakhstan had serious concerns about the security of the material. Now it is secure. There is no better example of how the Nunn/Lugar program can help eliminate the national security threat before it arises. This is defense by other means, and in a big way.

Under our agreement to take control of this nuclear weapons grade material, the United States will provide assistance to the Nunn/Lugar program to help Kazakhstan eliminate its nuclear weapons infrastructure and reorient the technical skills of its nuclear experts and infrastructure for civilian purposes.

The State Department's Freedom Support Act will provide additional funds to help Kazakhstan repair the damage from years of Soviet nuclear weapons testing within its borders.

Let me tell you briefly how Project Sapphire came about. It began when the Kazakhstani government approached the United States to inform us that it had custody of this weapons grade uranium that it lacked the means to store, secure, or properly dispose of. They asked us to help ensure that this material did not become a proliferation nightmare.

We recognized both the risk of proliferation and the opportunity to prevent it and moved quickly to develop jointly a plan to transfer the material here.

After months of planning, the project officially began on October 7th when President Clinton directed the Department of Defense and the Department of Energy to initiate the transfer. Vice President Gore was involved in leading this operation thereafter.

It culminated last weekend when the nuclear material was picked up at the Ulba plant in Kazakhstan and flown out of the closest airport in Ust by military airlift. The last of this material arrived at Dover Air Force Base Monday night and was shipped in special containers via high security ground convoy to the Y-12 plant where it arrived this morning and went into safe storage.

The transfer went very smoothly, with no risk to the security or the health or safety at either end. The people involved not only completed a highly complex, sensitive mission with great success, they have done a great deal to make the world safer from nuclear danger.

If that wasn't enough, the U.S. technical team in Kazakhstan also took this opportunity to raise funds among themselves for infant clothes, baby formula, and cold weather gear for local orphanages. In addition, when the Air Force transports flew to Kazakhstan to pick up the U.S. technical team and the nuclear materials, the planes brought almost 40,000 pounds of aid.

I would like to personally congratulate the crack U.S. inter-agency team and all the personnel involved for their great work, and for going above and beyond the call of duty. The United States especially wants to thank President Nazarbayev and the Kazakhstan government for its wisdom in seeking safe storage for this material and for seeking our help. This is global leadership for the post Cold War era, and it results in no small part from the trust, the understanding and the cooperation building between the United States and Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan has made tremendous strides in joining the community of forward-looking nations. It quickly agreed to rid its territory of nuclear weapons, and early this year signed a non-proliferation treaty. It demonstrated the sensitivity to regional security by consulting with the Russian government before proceeding with Project Sapphire.

Over the past year the U.S./Kazakhstan relationship has grown and deepened, and we are grateful for this new gesture of cooperation and trust. We applaud President Nazarbayev and the Kazakhstan government for helping to make the world safer and more secure.

Now I'd like to give Secretary Christopher and Secretary O'Leary an opportunity to talk about the crucial role their departments played in this success story. When we're done with that, the three of us will be prepared to take a few questions. Then we have Dr. Carter and staff from Energy and State prepared to provide additional background information after our briefing.

Secretary Christopher: Secretary Perry, thank you very much. I am very pleased to be here with Secretary Perry and Secretary O'Leary to mark a quite important event. The transfer of this highly enriched uranium from Kazakhstan to the United States is really a landmark event in President Clinton's non-proliferation strategy. From the outset, our Administration has made non-proliferation a strategic foreign policy goal. We've made non-proliferation, really, the arms control issue of the 1990s. I think the dangers that are posed by proliferation of nuclear weapons are very clear, and particularly they're clear in a situation where there's a risk that rogue states or rogue individuals might get control of these materials. President Clinton said last year at the United Nations that weapons like this can destabilize an entire region. They can turn a local conflict into a global human and environmental catastrophe.

The action we recognize today is an example of our determination to ensure that the Soviet nuclear legacy does not become a source of instability in the post Cold War world. This has been a good week on non-proliferation. The recent action by Ukraine which we recognized at the White House yesterday to embrace the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is a very important and positive development in the same direction, in the same area.

These efforts in the former Soviet Union of course complement our efforts to halt proliferation in Asia, most notably with the recently concluded Framework Accord with North Korea as well as the steps toward control of missile proliferation with China.

Each of these actions supports our drive to secure an indefinite extension of the Non-proliferation Treaty as well as our work toward a Comprehensive Test Ban over the course of the next year.

As Secretary Perry has said, the highly enriched uranium that has now been transferred from Kazakhstan to the United States is enough to have really started a very substantial small nuclear arsenal. Kazakhstan took its obligation very seriously to protect this material, and I want to express my appreciation to Ambassador Suleymenov who is here with us today. I want to also express my appreciation to the International Atomic Energy Agency which will maintain safeguards on this material. Appreciation also to the government of Russia who consulted so carefully with them about this legacy of the Soviet nuclear program. Our ambassador Bill Courtney from Kazakhstan who is here today did a superb job of diplomacy on what was a fairly difficult diplomatic mission. I want to congratulate all the dedicated members of the team from the Defense Department, the Energy Department, as well as those from the State Department who worked through this project to maintain the secrecy that was so important to it and was able to carry it off. So we have a landmark event here, and I'm glad that we were part of it.

Thank you.

Secretary O'Leary: Thank you Secretary Perry and Secretary Christopher.

I'd like to focus for just a bit on the details of this very historic operation. I would remind you that Y-12 just this year had undergone its first in a series of inspection visits by the International Atomic Energy Agency making Y-12, therefore, a safe-cited site which the IAEA will ultimately complete its review as a safeguarded entity within the United States of

America. That is a key fact.

But I want to focus you for a bit on this team of 27 nuclear experts, flight operators and determiners and, of course, translators, who went into Kazakhstan and spent six weeks doing six months worth of work; establishing a factory, as it were, about the size of a three or four car garage to process this high enriched uranium.

The support facility which provided some 99 percent of the equipment and the energy for the work has been described to me as about the size of a county fair in Tennessee.

I think it's important to focus on these issues to give you some idea of the very enormous effort undertaken by both men and women working on this project. The speed with which we and they had to move was occasioned by the weather, as we were fearing that we would not be able to transport the material when safely contained and ready for movement should the winter weather set in.

I'd like to introduce to you Mr. Alex Riedy who will later be available to talk with you who led this team as part of the DOE's Martin Marietta team at Oak Ridge and who shared with me last night the fact that this was, for him, a very great honor and something that his team was happy to do.

I want to also focus on the humanitarian effort and give that, too, a personal flavor. The team, I want to tell you, worked 10 to 12 hours every day six days a week. On the rare seventh day when they were off, their colleagues working there at the site simply took them sight-seeing around the area. The USA team asked, "Is there anyone nearby who needs some assistance?" They were told about the orphanages and a pension home for those who were retired. From that one question the team on the ground adopted an orphanage and later decided on their own that they would like to collect funds so that the youngsters living in two orphanages there would receive milk, other food, and clothing for the cold winter.

They then called back to the States, discussed with their colleagues both at Martin Marietta and at the Defense Department and in the Department of Energy the further need for other equipment to get citizens through the winter. That phone call led to a follow-on of the \$1,800 that the team on the ground put together for the youngsters in the orphanage, and then the delivery of some 30,000 pounds of equipment that went in with the transport ship to bring out the material.

I do believe on the eve before Thanksgiving that this is an important fact to celebrate as well. My colleagues have brought with them a few pictures of the youngsters at the orphanage so that you can get a sense of that part of the story. There they are receiving some goods and toys that were purchased in Kazakhstan. Here are a group of the youngsters outside of the orphanage when our colleagues visited there.

I want to focus for a moment on several key factors I believe are important. I understand that it was reported in one of the national news press this morning that we found the conditions there in Kazakhstan to be unsafe. I want to be clear that the United States was in at the request of the Kazakhstan government looking at how we could move that material into an IAEA safeguarded facility. That was the mission, so I want to correct that impression or improve upon the discussion someone had with the press.

I need for a moment to discuss now conditions at Y-12. The point to be made and to take away with you is that the material moving into Y-12 is non-irradiated material -- not nuclear waste. The environmental assessment that we undertook in the last fall asks the question which anyone living nearby Y-12 would want to have answered, how safe is this material? The answer coming out of that environmental assessment was, safe to workers who would be handling it, as the team did and are now handling it at Y-12; so much so that the dosage received in simply handling this material which was shielded by about an inch and a half shield, would simply submit those workers to about 15 milirems of radiation. You need to know that the normal dose of radiation we all receive normally in our everyday lives is 170 milirems.

Most important, I believe, is the fact that once the material is safely stored as it will be and is now at Y-12, the exposure to anyone in the community is .10 milirems. That's an important fact for you to know because people in the community are very concerned and often confused about the difference between waste, which this is not; and non-irradiated material, which this is.

Finally, you should know that we discussed the details of this operation with our regulators who have responsibility for regulating the safety of nuclear material at our site, and they are comfortable and understand that for the short term this material meets their requirements and they will go in, subsequently, during this coming month, to ensure that for the interim term the material will be at the site, that it will remain in a safe status as is the case of all material at Y-12.

The final point I would like to make involves the interim nature of the storage at Y-12. As the President directed us when he assigned this mission to this team of departments, we were to ensure that this material moves on to be down-blended so that it might be used in a commercial nuclear reactor application. We will, within a number of weeks, be soliciting the private sector for an opportunity to down-blend this high enriched uranium to low enriched uranium which now makes it a commercial product which any utility can purchase.

There are a number of steps we have to go through, not the least of which are securing its release from Customs. Customs still has legal authority over it, though it is in the possession of the United States DOE, and ultimately moving it into commerce. That is my intention and I have so committed that within three to six months we will understand which commercial facility will do the down-blending.

I think that completes the details of my story. I would once again want to emphasize with each of you as we have talked about the new nuclear danger, that it's these issues that we have contemplated, and this is a very happy day for a celebration of an issue seen to be important internationally and responsible governments in Kazakhstan and the United States of America, with a great team of real live people on the ground in Kazakhstan working with their colleagues there to accomplish this very important mission. I'm proud to be associated with everyone who's been involved in it.

Q: Mr. Secretary, are there any comparable plans underway to do similar removal from say Ukraine, Belarus and other countries of the former Soviet Union which may have weapons grade uranium stored?

Perry: We have no such plans at this time.

Q: Mr. Secretary, can you tell us, there's been a statement from some elements of the Russian government that this is not really weapons grade material. Can you assure us that it actually was? And also, does this constitute the entire amount of material that was in Kazakhstan?

Perry: This is very highly enriched uranium. It is weapons grade material. I state that unambiguously. I cannot state categorically that there is no other such source anywhere else. As far as we know, this is it.

Q: When did Kazakhstan first bring this situation to your attention? Was your first approach to try to persuade the Russians to accept it? And in monetary terms, what did Kazakhstan gain from it?

Perry: Kazakhstan is getting an agreed package of compensation including both funds from the Nunn/Lugar threat reduction program and from the State Department's Freedom Support Act. I'm not free at this time to describe the details of that compensation package.

This discussion began in late summer or early fall of last year, I don't remember the exact month. The Russian government was brought in very early in the discussions before any final decisions were made to move material out.

Q: Could you give us an indication of what this operation cost the United States with all three departments?

Perry: The airlift costs, which was the primary costs to the Department of Defense, were about \$3 million. Perhaps Secretary O'Leary could add to that the DOE costs that were involved.

O'Leary: The DOE costs would have included the 27 DOE contract employees who were part of that team and the necessary equipment to support the team including the food and fuel for them. If not today, then certainly this afternoon we will total all those costs up to the maximum extent that I can and provide them to you.

Q: Can you tell me please, sir, whether you know if this cache of weapons grade material was targeted by any country or terrorist group for possible smuggling out of Kazakhstan?

Perry: We do not know of such targeting.

Q: You don't have any idea whether...

Perry: I don't have any idea of such targeting.

Q: If I could follow up the question to Secretary O'Leary, I'm not clear as to whether the material was purchased or donated by the government of Kazakhstan. And to follow that a little further, is the United States now open for business to purchase, acquire and store materials that might be unsecure in other parts of the former Soviet Union?

Perry: I think this situation was probably one of a kind in terms of the combination of the fact that the material was very highly enriched, that is direct weapons grade material, that the

government of Kazakhstan came to us and asked for assistance and support.

I want to emphasize, they were guarding this material properly. The statement that it was poorly guarded is not correct, but it was a great drain on their resources to do it. They do not have the facilities that enable them to do that routinely as we do. It's much more effective and efficient for this to be included in the large supply of similar material that we have at the Y-12 plant.

We are not in business or seeking to repeat this, but if a similar, identical situation comes up, the factors that led us to make this decision I think would similarly be true.

Q: Do you expect Oak Ridge to be the site for future shipments of any foreign material that you get? How do you increase security out there to keep track of that?

O'Leary: The amount of this additional material amounts to .11 percent of the total supply that we can accommodate at Oak Ridge. So it's a minor amount against the total, so we don't need to add additional people for that amount. Understand as well, that we contemplate accepting more of our own material into Oak Ridge, and you need to know that in doing the environmental assessment we also gave ourselves a cushion of ten percent of the total storage available at Y-12 for foreign materials, not contemplating that we would need to receive them, but being fairly broad and trying to plan for our environmental assessment. But I want to be clear that that would only be a 10 percent addition on what we expect to have taken when the facility is totally occupied.

Q: (Inaudible)

O'Leary: I want to reaffirm what Secretary Perry has already said. We do not contemplate at this time additional shipments. But what I have learned in the time I've been in this job is, it's always nice to contemplate some contingency, so this contingency was contemplated when we were developing the environmental assessment, which I'm required to do under the law.

Q: You said this was being guarded properly, was your word, by the Kazakh authorities. Does that mean then the decision to go to the trouble and expense is one that was mainly driven by economic factors relieving economic burdens from the Kazakh government rather than concerns about security?

Perry: Concern about security was the driving factor both on the part of the government of Kazakhstan and on the part of the government of the United States. We have a facility in Tennessee that was precisely designed to do that, and does it for large amounts of material and it was very simple to add this relatively small amount of material at essentially no extra cost to us to maintain the continued storage of it.

O'Leary: I think it's important to add that the real kicker here was qualifying for International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards, which is something that the Department of Energy was already working on, being the first nation in the world to invite that inspection to one of its nuclear production facilities. I would like to use this as an opportunity to invite other nuclear weapons nations to contemplate and take the same action.

Q: Can you comment on the air strikes in Bosnia and whether they will relieve the situation in Bihac in any way?

Perry: The air strikes in Bosnia which were conducted against the airfield there a few days ago were for the specific purpose of deterring future air strikes by the Serbs against Bihac and other areas. We believe they will be successful in doing that. If they are not, we will have to take additional action.

The air strikes today were specifically against surface-to-air missile facilities which were threatening the NATO air patrol in that area. We have had a long-standing practice. We've been conducting air patrol over that area for many many months now, and we've had long-standing rules of engagement. So if any of those surface-to-air missiles try to engage or illuminate our aircraft, we are free to strike them.

Q: Secretary Christopher, could I ask you please, is it true that the government of Bosnia has said that if Bihac falls it will have to seriously consider giving up on its support of the contact group peace plan, and also perhaps even pulling out of the Croatian Federation. And just generally speaking, what is the United States and what are the allies preparing to keep Bihac from falling?

Christopher: On the first part of your question, there's no doubt that President Izetbegovic and Prime Minister Silajdzic regard the situation in Bihac as a very serious one. If it were to fall, I think the consequences would be serious. Prime Minister Silajdzic called me on Sunday to express appreciation for the steps that we were taking. We had a good talk. I told them we were going to be doing everything we could.

The various steps we're taking is to encourage the establishment of an exclusion zone. We're contacting our colleagues in NATO about further action that might be taken in the Bihac pocket. As you know, a cease-fire is being sought by the United Nations, so we're encouraging each of those actions that might relieve the pressure on the Bihac pocket and the city of Bihac. We'll be working at that today. But it is a serious situation and on the first part of your question, Barry, I think the leaders of Bosnia are watching the situation with a good deal of care.

Q: Madame Secretary, how exactly was the material processed in Kazakhstan? How would you...

O'Leary: You ought to take advantage of (U.S. official) who is here who can give you the real details of the operation and give it a real human touch. I leave him in your hands.

Press: Thank you.