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August 9, 1968

Chairman Seaborg
Commissioner Ramey
Commissioner Tape
Commissioner Johnson

ANNOUNCEMENT OF SHIPMENT OF MATERIAL FROM THULE, GREENLAND, TO SAVANNAH RIVER PLANT

Attached for your information is a public announcement being issued by the Department of Defense and the Danish Government concerning an ecological survey of the Thule, Greenland, area where a B-52 carrying nuclear weapons crashed on January 21. DOD advised us belatedly last night that the release was being issued in Washington and Copenhagen at 10 a.m. EDT today, August 9. The release includes the fact that contaminated residue from the crash site is being shipped to our Savannah River Plant for disposal. Questions and answers furnished by DOD for use in response to inquiries also are attached.

The AEC announcement covering the disposal of residue at Savannah River which was sent to you on July 15 will be issued simultaneously by the Savannah River Operations Office. This announcement was coordinated with DOD and the Department of State.

(signed) Edwin E. Stokely for
John A. Harris, Director
Division of Public Information

Attachments

cc: R. L. Hollingsworth, General Manager
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The Department of Defense announced today the beginning of the wrap-up actions related to the B-52 crash last January in Thule, Greenland.

First, Danish scientists will lead a joint two-part ecological survey. Secondly, approximately 600 containers of melted ice, snow and other residue, collected at the crash site, will be shipped to the United States for disposal.

The joint Danish-U.S. ecological survey will begin at Thule in early August. It is part of a joint Danish-U.S. follow-up effort agreed upon at the last meeting of Danish and American scientists early this year. The survey party will again evaluate the environment in the crash area. Previous joint scientific findings established that there was no risk in the area for human beings, nor for marine, animal, or plant life as a result of the B-52 crash last January.

This re-evaluation is in keeping with the conservative scientific approach followed throughout the recovery operation.

The Danes will conduct the main phase on the surface where samples of plant and animal life will be collected and evaluated. Their party, operating from the 54-foot Danish motor ship, Atlanta, will consist of five Danish scientists, specializing in the field of biology, ecology, hydrography, and health physics. One American scientist will also accompany this team. Their one-month surface survey will also provide an opportunity to acquire new knowledge of the region's normal ecology.

In support of the joint program, the United States is furnishing an oceanographic research submersible--The Star II--which will survey the area below the crash site. Underwater survey operations are expected to be completed in August.

(more)

In addition to the joint survey, the United States will remove previously collected ice, snow and aircraft debris from the Thule crash site. This low-level, radioactive residue will be sealed in containers and tanks and transported in three MSTS ships during August and September to the United States for disposal.

The ships will off-load the material at the U. S. Army port at Charleston, South Carolina. It will then be moved by rail for final burial at the AEC Savannah River Plant near Aiken, South Carolina.

As required, the shipment will be monitored during the entire operation to assure compliance with all existing safety regulations.

Weapons debris was previously airlifted to the AEC Pantex Plant at Amarillo, Texas.

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1. Q. For what purpose will the Star III submersible be used?

A. We went to great lengths in the weeks immediately following the crash to remove contaminated aircraft debris from the ice in the vicinity of the B-52 crash. While a joint US-Danish scientific group has concluded that there is no risk for human beings, nor for marine, animal or plant life, joint surveillance continued. As you know, there was some breaking of the ice at the impact point. A submersible will be used to see if any significant amount of debris did penetrate the ice and, if so, if such debris could conceivably present any hazard. This is in keeping with our general conservative philosophy of verifying, where possible, all theoretical conclusions with appropriate direct observations.

2. Q. How much aircraft debris would there have to be on the ocean floor to constitute a hazard?

A. The important aspect is not "how much" but "what kind" of debris and to what extent it is stabilized on the ocean floor. Most of the crash debris was confined to the top of the ice and was recovered. The only possible problem is the drifting shoreward of fragments which might be collected by souvenir hunters. However, the remote possibility of such fragments drifting under the weak reversing current and the soft bottom conditions which exist at Thule has been determined by US Navy oceanographers to be improbable. But, as stated in the release, we are checking the conclusions of the Danish-US scientific group

3. Q. Will the sub mersible measure radioactive emissions on the ocean bottom?

   A. The Star III is not equipped with radiological measuring devices because the type of radioactivity associated with this debris could not be detected through a medium such as water.

4. Q. If aircraft debris is found on the ocean floor would it then be considered a hazard to animal and plant life?

   A. Both U.S. and the Danes believe not. The Danes will check this conclusion by their ecological survey this summer. The only remote possibility is that of debris drifting shoreward. The submersible will assist us in determining the degree to which the debris, if any, is fixed on the ocean bottom. This evaluation will, in turn, determine whether either recovery operations or further monitoring of the shoreline will be needed.

5. Q. Are you certain that you will not find weapon parts on the ocean floor?

   A. We cannot completely discount the possibility that pieces might have penetrated the ice in the impact area. Should we find some weapon pieces, the associated contamination problem would be similar to that of contaminated aircraft debris.

6. Q. Why wasn't a submersible used sooner at the crash site?

   A. July through September is considered the best time of the year for such a project due to the minimization of ice hazards. In

addition, since the US-Danish joint scientific group concluded that weak reversing currents and the soft ocean floor at the crash site minimize drift, it was not considered necessary to probe the ocean bottom during the ice laden months of January through June.

7. Q. Do you plan to remove all aircraft debris which you might find on the ocean floor?

   A. No. In the highly improbable case that we detect fragments capable of drifting with the current, they would be recovered. However, we expect that any aircraft debris we might find on the ocean floor will not be capable of drifting and therefore will not constitute a hazard. Thus, no recovery efforts should be necessary.

8. Q. Will you permit the press to be present during the submersible operations at Thule?

   A. Yes, to the extent that such presence does not interfere with the operations and that they can be physically accommodated.

9. Q. What are the physical and operational characteristics of the Star III?

   A. See the Star III fact sheet.

10. Q. We understand that the crash site on the ice cap had drifted about a mile by the time the ice cap completed melting. Do you plan to search the bottom along the line of drift?

10. A. No. The debris which remained on the surface of the ice after the cleanup operation was insignificant. Our only concern then was debris which might have gone through the ice at the time of impact.

11. Q. When will the Star III be flown to Thule?

A. Around mid-August.

12. Q. How much will the entire operation cost the American taxpayer?

A. It would be impossible to give you an accurate figure until the entire operation is concluded. At that time cost figures can be provided.

13. Q. When will you release the measurements of radioactive contamination left on the ice after the completion of the cleanup operation?

A. After this summer's ecological survey has been completed and the data analyzed, we would expect the scientists to release their findings and conclusions.

14. Q. I thought we had recovered all the components of all four bombs during the initial recovery operations. Does this mean that some hazardous portions of some of the bombs might still be unaccounted for?

A. We previously announced after the crash that there was no danger of a nuclear explosion. As a result of the non-nuclear detonation of high explosives when the aircraft crashed, all of the pieces of all four weapons will never be completely accounted for -- some were obviously pulverized. However, significant amounts of all four weapons have been recovered from the ice surface and positively identified as portions of the four weapons involved in the crash. We cannot completely discount the possibility that some piece might have penetrated the ice in the impact area. Should we find some weapon piece, the associated contamination problem would be similar to that of the contaminated aircraft debris previously described and would be handled in the same way.