

March 7, 1972

**US Embassy Canada cable 391 to State Department,
'India's Nuclear Intentions'**

Citation:

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Summary:

U.S. embassy officials report on an interview with Lauren Gray, the chairman of Canada's Atomic Energy Control Board (AECB), who had recently visited India. Having spoken with Homi Nusserwanji Sethna, Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, and other officials, Gray believed that Sethna opposed a test and that as long as Sethna and Indira Gandhi were in office "there was no chance" that India would test a nuclear device, which would take three to four years to prepare. Other officials with the AECB disagreed with Gray's estimates - based on their assessment of Indian's ability to produce weapons grade plutonium, they argued that it would take no more than a year to produce a device. They also pointed out that about 18 months earlier there had been a "blackout" of statistical information on plutonium production in India.

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ACTION ACDA-19

INFO OCT-01 EUR-20 NEA-09 PM-06 AEC-11 SCI-05 L-03 CIAE-00

DODE-00 INR-06 NSAE-00 P-03 RSC-01 USIA-12 PRS-01

SS-14 NSC-10 GAC-01 OST-01 IO-12 RSR-01 /136 W
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OTTAWA-391
3-9-72

R 071630Z MAR 72
FM AMEMBASSY OTTAWA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8864
INFO AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

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NOFORN

SUBJECT: INDIA'S NUCLEAR INTENTIONS

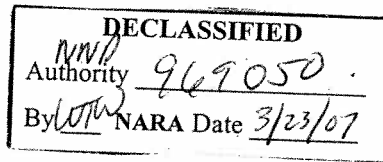
REF: NEW DELHI'S 2420 AND STATE'S 033843.

1. BEGIN CONFIDENTIAL. AS REQUESTED IN STATE'S REFTEL, SCIATT HAS DISCUSSED GRAY'S RECENT TRIP WITH HIM AND HAS DOUBLE-CHECKED VIEWS AND INFORMATION WITH SENIOR ATOMIC ENERGY CONTROL BOARD (AECB) AUTHORITIES. THE MAIN POINTS WHICH GRAY MAKES ARE AS FOLLOWS:

(A) SETHNA IS DEFINITELY OPPOSED TO LAUNCHING INTO EITHER A PNE OR NUCLEAR WEAPONS PROGRAM. ACCORDING TO GRAY, SETHNA HAS READY ACCESS TO PRIME MINISTER AND HAS PRIME MINISTER'S CONFIDENCE. STRESSING THAT IT WAS HIS RPT HIS OPINION AND NOT RPT NOT GOC OPINION, GRAY EXPRESSED THE VIEW THAT THERE WAS NO CHANCE OF INDIA LAUNCHING INTO A DEVICE PROGRAM AS LONG AS SETHNA AND GHANDI REMAIN IN OFFICE.

(B) GRAY QUALIFIED HIS OPINION TO SAY THAT THERE ARE FORCES WITHIN INDIA WHICH ARE IN FACT PRESSING FOR A DEVICE PROGRAM. HE FEELS THESE ARE CENTERED IN CERTAIN MILITANT MEMBERS OF THE PARLIAMENT AND PERHAPS SOME OF THE MILITARY. HE FURTHER EXPRESSED THE VIEW THAT POLITI-

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CAL PRESSURES COULD BUILD UP ON THE P.M. TO A POINT WHICH WOULD REQUIRE HER TO GO AHEAD WITH A DEVICE PROGRAM AGAINST HER AND SETHNA'S DESIRES.

(C) ON THE BASIS OF ABOVE FEELINGS AND LONG FAMILIARITY WITH SETHNA AND INDIAN RESEARCH STAFF, GRAY FELT THAT IF SUCH A PROGRAM WERE AUTHORIZED, SETHNA WOULD UNDOUBTEDLY BE THE MAN PICKED TO HEAD IT. IT WAS HIS OPINION, HOWEVER, THAT EVEN SETHNA WITH ALL OF THE FACILITIES AT HIS COMMAND WOULD REQUIRE THREE TO FOUR YEARS TO FABRICATE A FIRST DEVICE.

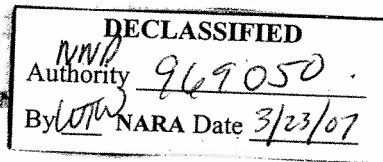
(D) WITH RESPECT TO THE AVAILABILITY OF PLUTONIUM, GRAY CITES FOLLOWING FIGURES: (1) 25 KGS OF PLUTONIUM COMMITTED TO THE ZERO ENERGY FAST-TEST FACILITY (22 KGS IN FUEL AND 3 KGS IN SCRAP AND THE PROCESSING CIRCUIT); (2) 25 TO 26 KGS COMMITTED FOR A FAST CRITICAL ASSEMBLY; AND (3) APPROXIMATELY 100 KGS COMMITTED TO THE FIRST CORE OF A FAST BREEDER TEST REACTOR (FBTR) WHICH WILL PARALLEL RHAPSODY AND HAVE A MIXED OXIDE CORE. ONCE OPERATIONAL THE FBTR PLUTONIUM WOULD REQUIRE HOT REPROCESSING BEFORE THE METALIC PLUTONIUM COULD BE RECOVERED FOR A DEVICE PROGRAM. THE FBTR PROGRAM ONCE UNDER WAY WILL REQUIRE AT LEAST TWO CORES PLUS SOME MAKEUP IN THE FABRICATION CHAIN. ACCORDING TO GRAY, THIS REPRESENTS A PUBLIC COMMITMENT OF VIRTUALLY ALL OF THE POSSIBLY AVAILABLE PLUTONIUM IN INDIA.

2. BEGIN SECRET/NOFORN. ALTHOUGH AECB AUTHORITIES DO NOT DISPUTE GRAY'S POLITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION AT THE PRESENT TIME, THEY DO MAKE THE FOLLOWING ADDITIONAL POINTS WHICH ARE PERTINENT TO ANY COMPLETE EVALUATION:

(A) VIRTUALLY ALL PLUTONIUM AVAILABLE EITHER AS OXIDE OR METAL IS FROM FUEL WITH AN EXPOSURE LEVEL OF NOT MORE THAN 1000 MWD PER TON.

(B) EVEN GIVEN THE SLOWNESS WITH WHICH PROGRAMS MOVE IN INDIA, THEY DISPUTE GRAY'S ASSESSMENT OF THE LENGTH OF TIME REQUIRED FOR AN INDIAN TEAM TO PUT A FIRST DEVICE TOGETHER. THEIR ESTIMATE WOULD BE MORE LIKE SIX MONTHS TO A YEAR MAXIMUM:

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KC) THEY POINT OUT THAT WITH PLUTONIUM ACCOUNTABILITY BEING WHAT IT IS, PARTICULARLY IN FABRICATION OPERATIONS, AND WITH SOMETHING OF THE ORDER OF 150 KGS IN A FABRICATION CIRCUIT, ENOUGH MATERIAL COULD EASILY BE DIVERTED FOR THE CORE OF A FIRST DEVICE AND COVERED UP AS BEING IN SCRAP OR "PROCESSING LOSSES."

(D) AECB IS INCLINED TO ACCEPT GRAY'S ESTIMATE THAT REACTOR PROGRAM COMMITMENTS PROBABLY ACCOUNT FOR ALL PLUTONIUM AVAILABLE IN INDIA TODAY. ACCORDING TO THEIR ESTIMATES, CYRUS SHOULD HAVE PRODUCED AT LEAST 75 KGS MINIMUM AND POSSIBLY THE APPROXIMATELY 150 KGS REQUIRED BY PRESENT COMMITMENTS. THEY ALSO POINT OUT, HOWEVER, THAT CYRUS IS CAPABLE OF SPECIAL LOADINGS FOR PRODUCTION PURPOSES WHICH MIGHT HAVE RESULTED IN CONSIDERABLY GREATER PRODUCTION OF WEAPONS GRADE PLUTONIUM. ALSO THE MATERIAL IN EITHER THE CRITICAL FACILITY OR THE ZERO ENERGY FACILITY COULD BE RECOVERED QUICKLY IF NEEDED FOR ANOTHER PURPOSE.

(E) AECB MAINTAINS THAT ABOUT 18 MONTHS TO TWO YEARS AGO THERE WAS A SUDDEN BLACKOUT BY THE INDIANS ON PLUTONIUM PRODUCTION FIGURES AND THAT GRAY'S EVALUATION NOTWITHSTANDING, INFORMATION PRESENTLY AVAILABLE DOES NOT PERMIT THEM ACCURATELY TO ESTIMATE THE MAXIMUM AVAILABLE PLUTONIUM.

(F) ITEM (E) ABOVE WAS PARTIALLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CANADIAN PRIME MINISTER'S DIRECTLY WARNING THE INDIANS THAT CANADIAN PLUTONIUM SHOULD NOT BE USED FOR ANY KIND OF NUCLEAR DEVICE. ACCORDING TO AECB THIS WARNING HAS BEEN REPEATED BY THE P.M.'S ASSISTANT IVAN HEAD AND IN BLUNTER LANGUAGE THAN THAT USED BY P.M. END SECRET/NOFORN.

3. BEGIN CONFIDENTIAL. BOTH AECB AND AECL AGREE THAT THE INDIANS INTERPRET EXISTING SAFEGUARDS AGREEMENTS WITH BOTH CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES AS PERMITTING INDIA TO MOUNT A PNE PROGRAM IF IT DECIDES TO DO SO AND THAT IN SUCH A CASE INDIA WOULD NOT RPT NOT CONSIDER ITSELF TO BE IN VIOLATION OF SAFEGUARDS COMMITMENTS. END CONFIDENTIAL.
GROUP 1.
SMITH

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