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FM MOSCOW 061345Z FEB 85

TO IMMEDIATE FCO

TELEGRAM NUMBER 158 OF 6TH FEB 85

INFO PRIORITY WASHINGTON, PARIS, BONN, UKDEL NATO.

FROM RATFORD IN AMBASSADOR'S ABSENCE ON TOUR

MOSCOW TELNO 133: SOVIET LEADERSHIP

1. THE US AMBASSADOR THIS MORNING, 6 FEBRUARY, REPORTED TO THE FOUR A POSSIBLE FURTHER INDICATION OF THE WAY EVENTS MAY GO. ZARUBINA, A VICE-CHAIRMAN OF THE SOVIET WOMEN'S COMMITTEE, WHO CANDIDLY DESCRIBED HERSELF AS A MEMBER OF THE KGB, YESTERDAY TOLD MRS HARTMAN THAT THERE WOULD BE A CC PLENUM ON 27 FEBRUARY AT WHICH CHERNENKO WOULD GIVE UP ONE OF HIS FUNCTIONS (BY IMPLICATION, THE GENERAL SECRETARYSHIP). SHE DID NOT (NOT) NAME GORBACHEV AS HIS SUCCESSOR, BUT CLEARLY IMPLIED THAT HE WOULD BE.

2. AS HARTMAN OBSERVED, THIS IS IN LINE WITH EARLIER REPORTS, PARTICULARLY THAT BY ED STEVENS. BUT BEARING IN MIND THE WAY IN WHICH SOME KGB SOURCES HAVE FROM THE VERY OUTSET BEEN FRANKLY CRITICAL OF CHERNENKO, WE BELIEVE IT SHOULD BE TREATED WITH CAUTION: IT COULD BE PART OF A CAMPAIGN TO SWING OPINION IN THE UPPER REACHES OF THE PARTY IN FAVOUR OF CHERNENKO'S STEPPING DOWN, RATHER THAN A STATEMENT OF AN ALREADY ADOPTED DECISION.

3. CHAZOV (PARA 4(E) OF TUR) HAS CONFIRMED TO THE VISITING FRENCH SECRETAIRE D'ETAT FOR HEALTH THAT HE IS ABOUT TO VISIT THE US, SPENDING 2-3 DAYS IN PARIS EN ROUTE BOTH WAYS. BUT THIS COULD BE EXPLAINED BY ANYTHING FROM CHERNENKO'S BEING IN A WEAKENED BUT STABILISED CONDITION (AND THEREFORE ABOUT TO STEP DOWN) TO HIS BEING ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY. YOU PAYS YOUR MONEY

4. MEANWHILE, RUMOURS PROLIFERATE THAT THE CC PLENUM ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, EXPECTED FOR THIS SPRING, MAY BE SHELVED FOR THE TIME BEING. SOME COLOUR IS LENT THEM BY THE FACT THAT THE SUBJECT IS CONSPICUOUSLY ABSENT FROM THE RSFRS ELECTION CAMPAIGN SPEECHES SO FAR PUBLISHED. THESE REPORTS TOO ARE BEING CAUGHT UP IN THE SPECULATION ABOUT A CHANGE IN THE LEADERSHIP. THOUGH THERE COULD BE OTHER EXPLANATIONS FOR THIS, SUCH A DELAY MIGHT BE OCCASIONED BY THE WISH TO AVOID HOLDING A SECOND PLENUM BEFORE A NEW GENERAL SECRETARY HAD HAD TIME TO TAKE FULL HOLD OF THE REINS.

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5. FOR WHAT IT IS WORTH, THE SOVIET MEDIA CONTINUE TO FEATURE CHERNENKO'S NAME PROMINENTLY. AND ALL SIX MEMBERS OF THE LEADERSHIP WHO HAVE SO FAR MADE ELECTION SPEECHES HAVE PAID FAIRLY LENGTHY TRIBUTE TO HIM AND CONVEYED HIS PERSONAL GREETINGS.

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