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KABUL: MAJOR AMMUNITION DEPOT EXPLODES

1. INTRODUCTION: AT APPROX 2210 ON 26 AUGUST A SERIES OF EXPLOSIONS BEGAN AT AN AMMUNITION DEPOT IN THE AREA OF THE 8TH AFGHAN DIVISION HEADQUARTERS AT QARGHA. THE EXPLOSIONS CONTINUED THROUGH TO 0330 ON 27 AUGUST. A FIRE IS STILL BURNING AT THE SITE. (271300). SINGLE MOST SERIOUS INCIDENT OF IT'S TYPE IN KABUL- AT LEAST SINCE 1982.

2. DETAIL: AT 2210 ON 26 AUGUST SMALL EXPLOSIONS AND FLASHES WERE SEEN IN THE DIRECTION OF 8 AFGHAN DIVISION HQ AT QARGHA (GRID SQUARES 3432N 6905E AND 3432N 6906E). BY 2245 THE EXPLOSIONS HAD BECOME EXTREMELY LOUD, CAME RAPIDLY IN SUCCESSION AND LASTED, AT THIS INTENSITY, FOR OVER TWO HOURS. AT MIDNIGHT TWO DISTINCT AND VERY LOUD EXPLOSIONS WERE HEARD AND THEN AT 0004 A BALL OF FIRE ROSE OVER 1,000 FEET INTO THE AIR. THE SHOCK WAVE FROM THE EXPLOSION WAS TREMENDOUS. SOME WINDOWS WERE BROKEN IN THE CENTRE OF TOWN- OVER 10 KMS FROM THE AMMUNITION DEPOT. MANY MORE WERE BROKEN NEARER THE SITE. A CLASSIC, NUCLEAR-TYPE, MUSHROOM CLOUD FORMED AND ROSE SEVERAL THOUSAND FEET INTO THE SKY. THIS EXPLOSION WAS POSSIBLY CAUSED BY SA2 ROCKETS GOING UP. THERE IS AN SA2 SITE NEAR THE DEPOT.

3. FOLLOWING THE 0004 EXPLOSION THE INTENSITY OF SOUND AND LIGHT EASED OFF, THOUGH MINOR EXPLOSIONS CONTINUED. AT 0120 THERE WAS A FURTHER VERY LOUD EXPLOSION. BY 0330 MOST OF THE ORDNANCE WAS

3. FOLLOWING THE OOD4 EXPLOSION THE INTENSITY OF SOUND AND LIGHT EASED OFF, THOUGH MINOR EXPLOSIONS CONTINUED. AT 0120 THERE WAS A FURTHER VERY LOUD EXPLOSION. BY 0330 MOST OF THE ORDNANCE WAS SPENT. THE FIRE HOWEVER WAS STILL GOING AT 0900 AND WILL PROBABLY BURN FOR MOST OF THE DAY.

4. WE HAVE NO RELIABLE INFORMATION AS TO WHAT CAUSED THE DEPOT TO TO GO UP. THERE ARE THREE POSSIBILITIES:

- A. MUJAHEDDIN ROCKET ATTACK
- B. SABOTAGE
- C. ACCIDENT-HUMAN OR TECHNICAL ERROR.

SOME REPORTS SAY THAT 2 OR 3 ROCKETS WERE HEARD BEFORE THE EXPLOSION SO A. IS A POSSIBILITY. THE LOCAL RADIO WAS VERY QUICK, ALMOST TOO QUICK (FIRST BROADCAST OF THE DAY), SAYING THAT THE CAUSE WAS C. IT MAY TAKE SOME TIME TO ESTABLISH THE TRUTH.

5. WE HAVE NO REPORTS OF NUMBERS OF CASUALTIES AS YET. THERE MUST HAVE BEEN 10'S OF THEM. HOUSES IN THE NEAREST RESIDENTIAL AREA TO THE SITE WERE SEVERELY DAMAGED AND THE BARRACKS TOO ARE BOUND TO HAVE SUFFERED HEAVILY. BOTH FIRE ENGINES AND AMBULANCES RUSHED TO THE SCENE FROM THE CENTRE OF KABUL THROUGHOUT THE NIGHT. ALSO, THERE WAS MUCH SMALL ARMS FIRE AND FLARE ACTIVITY WITH THE DRA FORCES OBVIOUSLY EXTREMELY JUMPY. AT 0850 A PAIR OF MIG 21'S PASSED LOW OVER THE WEST OF THE CITY HEADED FOR CARGHA AND PAGHMAN. THIS MAY HAVE BEEN A PUNITIVE SORTIE.

6. LOCAL RADIO REPORTED THAT NAJIB VISITED THE SITE VERY EARLY ON 27 AUGUST. OTHER SENIOR OFFICERS, AMONGST THEM NAZER MOHAMMED, THE DEFENCE MINISTER, HAVE ALSO BEEN SEEN GOING TO THE AREA. IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO DRIVE CLOSER THAN ABOUT 3 KMS TO THE SITE AS IT HAS BEEN SEALED OFF TO ALLOW EMERGENCY SERVICES THROUGH AND NO DOUBT TO PUT UP A SECURITY CORDON.

7. ADDRESSEES MAY LIKE TO PASS THE ABOVE STORY TO MEDIA CONTACTS, WHICH IS REASON WHY WE HAVE SENT THIS DESKBY.

8. WE HAVE A 2 HOUR VIDEO TAKEN BY A MEMBER OF THIS MISSION WHICH SHOWS EXTREMELY WELL THE FORCE AND SCALE OF THE EXPLOSIONS. THE OOD4 BLAST COMES OUT PARTICULARLY WELL. WE ARE ENDEAVOURING TO FIND A COURIER AMONGST THE WESTERN DIPLOMATIC COMMUNITY TO GET A COPY TO DELHI ON THE INDIAN AIRWAYS FLIGHT ON 28 AUGUST SO THAT A COPY CAN GET TO SAD (POSSIBLY FOR NEWS DEPT) AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. WE WILL REVERT ON THIS POINT. IN THE LONGER TERM THERE MAY BE USEFUL MATERIAL FOR INCLUSION IN THE NEXT COI FILM.

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