

Memo of Conversation

Between Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister A. Bessmertnykh, US Ambassador to the USSR J. Matlock and British Ambassador to the USSR R. Braithwaite
May 14, 1990

Received J. Matlock and R. Braithwaite at their request

Braithwaite stated that the embassies of Great Britain and the United States in Moscow have received identical instructions to deliver a joint demarche on a question of extreme importance concerning the compliance of the USSR with the 1972 Convention on the Prohibition of Biological (Bacteriological) and Toxin Weapons. Further, Braithwaite stated the following:

We have joint instructions to inform the Soviet side of our deep concern regarding the Soviet program of biological weapons. In the course of several years – including 1986, the year of the latest Convention review conference – concerns were expressed by the West about the Soviet compliance with the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention. They acquire new resonance in connection with the new information received by us on specific Soviet facilities, people and programs in the given fields. We have a basis to suggest that in the USSR a large-scale secret program in the field of biological weapons is being carried out and there exists significant stockpiles of such weapons far in excess of the reasonable requirements for research purposes. We also have information that bacteriological weapons are being manufactured and stockpiled in the USSR.

All of the above casts a doubt on the interest of the USSR in the real control over arms.

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We call on the Soviet side without delay to undertake measures to cease illegal activity in the field of bacteriological weapons, to cease production and destroy stockpiles.

This demarche has a goal of resolving this problem without bringing it to a high political level. We are interested in not burdening the contacts on a high and the highest levels with discussion of the given question. We also intend to do everything possible so that information about this demarche and the data in our possession does not leak into the press.

I asked which “new information” in the given case is mentioned. Can the interlocutors share any more specific thoughts on this subject?

Braithwaite replied that he has no instructions to add anything to the statement. The matter in question is “very substantial” information of a quite concrete nature. We have every reason to believe, the Ambassador added, that the “chairman of the Soviet military industrial commission” is aware of the program in the field of bacteriological weapons.

I drew the attention of the ambassador to the obvious absence of logic in the demarche. On the one hand, in essence, an attempt is being made to cast a shadow on the compliance of the USSR with its obligations on agreements on limitation and reduction of arms. And on the other hand, no information is presented that would support these claims.

Braithwaite reiterated that he was referring to information received recently and it touches on concrete facilities, people and programs in the area of biological weapons.

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I said that the motives of the move undertaken by the USA and Great Britain, as well as the strange tactic to cast a shadow over the Soviet policy without providing any information on the issue, aroused my concern. Frankly speaking, it arouses suspicions about the underlying cause of the demarche. In order to remove this concern of ours, it is necessary to at least see what you are talking about.

Braithwaite promised to bring to the knowledge of his government our wish to receive additional data about the information that served as a foundation for their demarche.

Further, I inquired why the demarche was undertaken specifically at the given moment – is it explained only by the fact that the above-mentioned “new information” appeared comparatively recently? Or was the timing of the demarche determined taking into account other circumstances?

Braithwaite replied that the mentioned question is most likely going to be the subject of further discussions, the information about Soviet military biological programs was received recently, and both governments – the American and British – have in mind to resolve this question in a businesslike way without public agitation around it. This approach in particular is motivated by the fact that numerous planned meetings at the highest level are approaching and governments of these countries are not interested in bringing the question of the Soviet biological weapons to the political level. We would like, Braithwaite underlined, to solve it without additional fuss. However, along with this, it was considered necessary to make the Soviet side aware of the concern existing in the US and Great Britain about the USSR’s activity in the area of biological weapons at the official level.

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J. Matlock stressed the point that the USA and Great Britain do not intend to raise the given question in a confrontational context and do not intend to make it public. He added that in all likelihood, Secretary of State Baker has in mind to raise this issue in more detail in a talk with E. A. Shevardnadze in the course of the upcoming negotiations in Moscow. Matlock underlined that the instructions regarding the demarche were received by the embassy through "top-secret channels." Aware of its content, are only the ambassador, counselor Joyce and advisor Smith. Surely, Matlock said, we are absolutely not interested in burdening our relations with a new problem on the eve of the most important negotiations at the highest levels.

I said that it is in the interests of all parties to remove concerns when they appear. At the same time it is not totally clear how it is possible to close the matter without having an idea about its essence. From the demarche, it only follows that there exists a claim which is by no means substantiated by anything yet, a claim about "some violation" by the Soviet Union of the Biological Weapons Convention. I added that we were making a note of the intention of the American and British sides to keep complete confidentiality around this issue, certainly our minister will be informed about the demarche.

Matlock and Braithwaite asked not to inform the press about this conversation at the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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Attending the meeting was the adviser of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, R. Smith, advisor of the U.K. embassy in Moscow R. Line, second secretary of the department for the US and Canada M. B. Berdennikov.

[signed]

A. Bessmertnykh,
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