

*** Document 48 of 25 for FBIS ***
 DOCN 000603236
 FBIS FBIS 017SEP19
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SUBJ BELARUS: Details of Inquiry Into Balloon Downing (Take 1 of 2)

SERI WS1809133595 Minsk ZVYAZDA in Belarusian 16 Sep 95 pp 1, 3

TEXT [Report by Syarhey Khrypach: "The Belarusians, Swiss, and Poles Are 'Blamed' for the Death of U.S. Balloonists. Where Is the Truth?" -- first paragraph published in boldface; passage within slantlines published in italics]

[FBIS Translated Text] A number of questions and stories immediately surrounded the unique tragedy of the U.S. balloon which was downed over the country's territory. So what actually happened in Byarozawski rayon, Brest Oblast? Was it a waft of a new "cold war," which would be very illogical and senseless in the current political situation? Or was it absurdity that claimed the lives of two people? To put it briefly, Belarus has found itself facing a large international scandal: On the one side of the barricade there is a small, independent, and neutral state which is just gaining prestige and renown in the world, and on the other side is the United States of America, a powerful state in all respects.

To remove all doubts and insinuations, as well as to issue an official statement for the foreign press, the members of the state commission for investigating the aircraft accident, which was set up at the president's personal instruction, provided details of their investigation on 14 September. They were reported by Yury Sivakow, commission deputy chairman and chief of the Belarusian Security Council Operational Department, First Deputy Foreign Minister Valeryy Tsapkala, and State Aviation Committee Chairman Ryhor Fyodaraw.

So, at 0914 on 12 September, the Antiaircraft Defense detected a balloon in Belarusian airspace. The servicemen were surprised by the balloon's unexpected appearance, since they had no information about it. The central command post examined all applications [for flight permits]. As a result of the examination, they concluded that this flying object should not have been in that place at that time, since there was no application concerning it. Following this, Major General Valeryy Kastenka, commander of the Antiaircraft Defense, in accordance with normative acts, decided to declare the highest alert.

At 1136 a take-off order was sent to Pruzhany airfield. A MI-24 combat helicopter took off with the mission to clarify all required information about the aircraft and to identify it. In particular, the crew was instructed not to get closer to the object than 50 meters.

After a period of time, the chopper approached the "UFO" at 100 meters. This took place 4 km from another airbase -- Asowtsy. The helicopter crew reported the following:

/"We can see a small balloon with a diameter of 3 or 4 meters. An attachment resembling a closed freight container hangs on the rope. The entire construction weighs approximately 1 tonne. There are no identifying signs. Nobody is answering inquiries on the 121.5 MHz international emergency frequency. The object is moving at an altitude of 2,300 meters in a north-easterly direction over a military airfield and near a deployment site of Strategic Missile

Troop units."/

The MI-24 fired warning shots from 600 meters: There was no reaction. Following this, the Air Defense commander himself gave the order to destroy the balloon. The helicopter maneuvered, made a 180-degree turn, and at 1154 -- three minutes after firing the first round -- the young captain again pulled the trigger of the heavy

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machine gun. Some 20 bullets pierced the balloon, and the gondola plunged from 2,300 meters and crashed 8 kilometers east of Byarosa, in a forest near the village of Kruhlaye.

Soon after this, another two balloons were detected. They were also warned by a helicopter, but it did not come to shooting, since their crews responded to radio inquiries and identified their nationality by displaying U.S. flags. The first balloon landed in the vicinity of Zelva at 1500, and the second landed near Luninets at 1815, and servicemen from Dawyd-Haradok accommodated the crew in their barracks.

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