

DJG 31 Jan 80

'ATOM BLAST' NEAR SOUTH AFRICAN SHIPS, SAYS CIA

By HUGH DAVIES in Washington

THE United States Central Intelligence Agency has given its reasons for suspecting that South Africa tested a nuclear device off the Cape of Good Hope four months ago.

Intelligence experts have told members of Congress that South African warships were positioned secretly at sea just below where an American satellite detected two bright flashes in the atmosphere.

But the CIA says it has not ruled out another theory — that Israel, a close ally of Pretoria, may have been responsible for the mysterious incident.

The flashes, or pulses, were spotted at 3 a.m. South African time on Sept. 22 by a Vela satellite orbiting about 60,000 miles above the earth.

According to scientists at the Los Alamos laboratory, New Mexico, the sequence and timing bore the "unmistakable" signature of a low-yield explosion estimated at 2.5 to three kilotons. This is the equivalent of 2,500 to 3,000 tons of TNT, about a quarter the yield of the Hiroshima bomb.

Shock wave

According to the CIA information circulating in Washington, one theory is that a rocket may have been fired from one of the South African ships.

It emerges also that a "ripple" was seen in the ionosphere above Puerto Rico a few hours after the satellite sighting 4,000 miles away. The suggestion is that a shock wave moved electrons in a layer of the ionosphere.

The diamond-shaped vela, which has made 41 confirmed sightings of atomic tests, recorded the flashes on two optical sensors, not one as

initially reported by officials. Scientists say this almost eliminates any suggestion that the instruments were faulty.

No radioactive debris has been found. However, this is not unusual and the Americans are reported to have taken more than a fortnight to collect a sample of rainwater in the area.

Pretoria denial

Mr Harold Brown, Defence Secretary, has said that there was "more than a possibility" that there was a nuclear explosion. A White House panel of scientists is to report on the affair next week.

South Africa, long thought to be involved in atomic development, has categorically denied suggestions that it may have become the seventh nation to join the nuclear club.

The Pretoria government was suspected of a plan to launch a weapons test in the summer of 1977, but apparently backed off after warnings by the United States, Britain, Russia, France and West Germany.

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