

# Flash in the sky

THERE have been several articles on UFO sightings in the Northern Emirates in recent years and 'Khaleej Times' carried one such report on November 30, 1983, titled 'UFO sighted in RAK'. As the 'cleaning man' so rightly pointed out in your report 'Flash in the sky' (March 5), the orange objects and pulsating beams are nothing more than reflected light from the Sajja flares. 'Khaleej Times' reporters are at variance in their estimates of the direction in which these optical effects were observed on the night of March 4, with the page 1 story putting them north-east of Dubai airport, which is correct, and the page 3 article having them 'pulsating' in a section of the north-western sky as observed from the Expo Centre. The Sajja flares are exactly due east of the Expo Centre at a distance of 32km. These flares did not exist prior to the summer of 1982 and each winter since then, whenever the 'lights' have appeared, there have been many calls to newspapers and meteorological authorities seeking an explanation.

At Sharjah airport, we have 10 very experienced meteorological observers operating round the clock, whose job it is to make observations of the weather every 30 minutes. These observations are made primarily in support of aviation operations and much of the data is obtained from 'state of the art' automated instrumentation. But there is no substitute for the human eye when it comes to identifying such things as cloud type, cloud amount, cloud height, the presence of hydrometeors (fog, mist, drizzle and rain), lithometeors (haze, dust-haze, smoke-haze, rising sand, dust-storm, etc.) and photometeors such as

corona, halo, rainbow, fogbow, aurora, mirage and unusual optical effects. The environmental conditions required for these unusual reflections include clear, dust-free and relatively dry air from the surface up to about 8,000 feet, and then one or more humid layers in which Altocumulus or Altostratus cloud has formed. This cloud base is the 'screen' on which the display is projected.

When the cloud is directly over the Sajja flares, there may be a bright white or orange disc which when viewed from a distance has the typical flying-saucer shape. Below this spot, there may be one or two narrow vertical beams visible in the almost saturated air below the cloud base. The 'pulsating' effect may be due to variations in the concentration or size of the water droplets within the airmass passing through the beam.

When the lower atmosphere is laden with dust haze, as is often the case in the Emirates, then the light from the flares is absorbed and scattered by the small suspended particles, and an aurora of orange light surrounds the flares which can be seen from as far away as Ras Al Khaimah and Hatta.

This glow has served as a novel navigation aid to aircrew, mariners and desert travellers for several years, but it is understood that the flares will diminish considerably in size this summer when new processing equipment comes on line. The days may also be numbered for Charlie, our nickname for the cumulus cloud which often sits over the flares for days at a time.—**Meteorological Observers, Sharjah International Airport, Sharjah.**

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