

Cuban crisis replayed by CIA as details released

LANGLEY, Va. (AP) - The CIA had 25 agents reporting from Cuba during the 1962 missile crisis that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. But intelligence analysts in Washington discounted their reports of seeing what looked like huge missile-like tubes, believing the Soviet military buildup in Cuba was purely defensive.

"The record of intelligence is not unblemished in this crisis," Deputy CIA Director Adm. William O. Studeman said Monday during an unprecedented seminar at CIA headquarters, where more than 100 secret documents were made public and key players in the crisis shared their memories.

The compilation of documents includes notes taken by then-agency director John McCone during White House crisis meetings, estimates by the intelligence community, reports from Cuban agents, and memoranda coded Ironbark - meaning they were based on information from one of the most valuable Soviet spies of the Cold War, Col. Oleg Penkovsky.

If the CIA could do it over, Adm. Studeman said, it would pay more attention to the informants reporting sightings of Soviet missiles in Cuba, and analyze better how the Soviets viewed deployment of missiles outside their borders.

In fact, the documents and reminiscences highlight how the United States nearly missed the deployment of the SS-4 medium-range missiles in Cuba until it was almost too late.

As it was, the deployment only became known when a U-2 spy plane

photographed the launch pads on the western third of Cuba on Oct. 14 - at least one month after the first batch got to the island.

Warren Frank, then with the agency's foreign intelligence branch, said much of the Cuban agent reporting was collected in Miami at what became the largest CIA station in the world.

The 300-member station, located in what is now Miami's zoo, collected reports from some 25 agents on the island, interviewed Cuban refugees, and talked to emigres in regular touch with their families.

One report declassified Monday was made Sept. 17, 1962 by a 47-year-old Cuban described as a businessman with four years of schooling and of average intelligence.

The informant described driving out of Havana and observing a convoy of 16 trucks and eight trailers, seven of which were carrying "what

looked like huge tubes extending over the entire length of the flatbed and completely covered with canvas." The eighth was carrying what looked like a radar, he said.

The CIA received hundreds if not thousands of such reports, many of which its agents in Miami deemed credible, said Mr. Frank.

But analysts in Washington dismissed all but a handful as unreliable. Several analysts said part of the problem was that they could not understand why the Soviets would want to deploy medium-range missiles in Cuba.

A landmark analysis on Sept. 19, 1962 - also declassified Monday - said the Soviets were only deploying anti-aircraft missiles in Cuba to deter a possible U.S. invasion effort in the wake of the botched Bay of Pigs landing the year before.

"I'm not aware that we had information from any Soviet source on a planned deployment" of the SS-4s - which have sufficient range to hit Washington - said Norman Smith, a CIA analyst at the time.

So skeptical were analysts at CIA headquarters that at one point they cabled Miami telling the station to stop submitting Cuban agent reports, Mr. Frank said. In another cable, CIA headquarters dismissed a Cuban agent report of a tube as long as a palm tree, saying palm trees come in different sizes.

At the same time, U-2 reconnaissance planes and lower-flying spy aircraft were providing photos of Soviet ships laden with crates of military material. "We developed the science of crate-ology" to determine what was in the boxes based on their size, said Dino Brugioni, who headed a team of photo interpreters.

But, he said, the CIA did not discover for sure that the Soviets had nuclear warheads until the crisis was defused at the end of November.