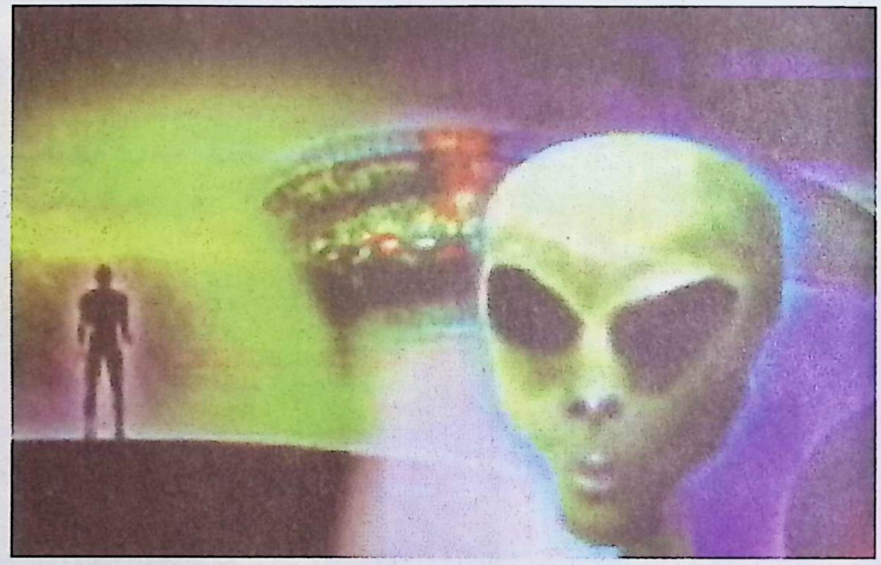
French Space Agency Releases Secret UFO Archive Online

By Angela Doland
Associated Press Writer



FRANCE's space agency is opening up its secret "X-Files" three decades of research into UFO sightings, including police reports, witness sketches and maps that scientists used to search for logical explanations behind mysterious phenomena in the skies.

The first batch of archives went up on the agency's Web site Thursday, and the pages have had so much traffic that the site has been tough to access since.

Only about 9 percent of France's UFO cases have ever been fully explained, the group says, while experts have found likely reasons for another 33 percent of cases.

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The agency, known by its French initials CNES, said it went public with the documents to draw the scientific community's attention to unexplained cases and because their secrecy generated buzz, with many people suspicious that officials were hiding something.

Jacques Patenet, the director of the agency's UFO cell, said everything in the archive would be published online, with the exception of psychological reports about witnesses as well as their names.

"The public sector needs an official group that can take these phenomena into account and, in most cases, respond to public observations," Patenet said. "The great danger would be to leave the field open to sects and charlatans."

The archive contains about 100,000 documents from those cases including expert reports, drawings by witnesses and some audio and video files.

Starting in 1977, French space agency researchers tried, usually with limited funding and staff, to explain reports of unidentified flying objects. Many cases were easy the objects were simply unusual clouds or space debris falling back into the atmosphere, the CNES said.

Other cases were impossible to crack. The most baffling cases were labeled "Class D aerospace phenomena" which the agency defines as "inexplicable despite precise testimonies and the (good) quality of material information gathered." Some 28 percent of the agency's files fall into the category.

Most of the time, Patenet said, witnesses were sincere about what they saw.

"Very few of them were looking for publicity, as most of them feared most of all that they would not be taken seriously," he said. Still, there were frauds.

In 1979, in Cergy-Pontoise outside Paris, a man showed up at a police station claiming that his friend had been abducted by a UFO a bright light that appeared on the road and swallowed up his car. Several days later, the man purportedly reappeared in a field, emerging out of a sphere of light.

Investigators went so far as to test the man's blood for signs that he had recently experienced weightlessness and they found none. The group labeled it a hoax.

Some cases took years to unravel. In 1985, two farmers near the Atlantic coastal city of Royan saw a burning object drop into a field nearby.

Experts initially concluded that it was part of the propulsion device of a recently launched satellite. Eventually they realized it was a piece of leftover German World War II ordnance that spontaneously exploded four decades after the war and launched into the sky, the agency said.

Among the unexplained cases, one of the most perplexing concerned a 1994 Air France flight. While flying over the Paris region, the airplane's crew noticed a large brownred disk hovering in the horizon and constantly changing shape. The case "has never been explained to this day, and leaves the door open to all possible hypotheses," the agency wrote.