

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

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Prime Minister

The Foreign Secretary thinks that we should not carry out alone the task of guarding the Security Committee talks - but should instead seek to rotate the task with other MNF contributors.

3 October, 1983

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Dear Michael

Lebanon

As you know we have authorised the Commander of BRITFORLEB to provide a presence at the first few meetings of the Security Committee set up to implement the ceasefire in Beirut. The Foreign Secretary is however concerned that we should think through carefully our involvement in the longer term, particularly given that we could be taking on an open-ended commitment.

The first three meetings of the Security Committee have passed off without incident. Our Chargé d'Affaires in Beirut reports that BRITFORLEB's presence at the meetings of the Security Committee continues to attract favourable comment and publicity from all the parties. There is no doubt that BRITFORLEB has made an indispensable contribution to the vital task of consolidating the ceasefire and starting the process of reconciliation. The good-will which we have earned will increase our influence over the parties and should mitigate the risks to BRITFORLEB if there is a further outbreak of fighting. Sir Geoffrey has noted that the Ministry of Defence do not disagree with the judgement of the Commander of BRITFORLEB that the additional risk of carrying out this task is acceptable, and that he wishes to continue what the Lebanese and his men regard as a vitally important task.

There is no doubt that as time drags on the political benefit to us of this task will diminish. And the risks are likely to increase, particularly if the talks go badly. As long as all parties are involved in the talks and reasonably content, the chances of an attack on the meeting place are reasonably small. But difficulties could arise if one party withdraws or factions within one party begin to criticise the conduct of the talks. There is also a risk that BRITFORLEB will be associated by the Lebanese with any breakdown in the ceasefire talks, with a consequent increase in danger to our troops. Moreover we must have in mind, that, having agreed to this extension of BRITFORLEB's role, it will be harder for us to resist future Lebanese demands that BRITFORLEB operate elsewhere outside the Beirut area.

In these circumstances, the Foreign Secretary thinks that we should continue to afford the protection requested of us, but that we should now seek to rotate the task among some or all of the other MNF contingents (the Americans are in practice unlikely to be acceptable). I understand that there is now a suggestion

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that a 24-hour watch is required. This gives us a good peg. If a firm Lebanese request is made the Foreign Secretary considers that we should reply that this is beyond our capacity, but that we would be glad to approach others (Italians, French or Lebanese Internal Security Forces) to share the job with us. This applies even more obviously to any request to us to provide security for the political (national reconciliation) committee established under the ceasefire.

The Foreign Secretary would be happy to discuss this soon if Mr Heseltine wishes.

I am copying this to John Coles (No 10).

Yours ever

(J E Holmes)
Private Secretary

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