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MIDDLE EAST: ADVANCE COPIES 16

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TELEGRAM NUMBER 3088 OF 23 OCTOBER  
INFO IMMEDIATE MODUK, BEIRUT, DAMASCUS, TEHRAN, UKMIS NEW YORK  
PRIORITY CAIRO, TEL AVIV, JEDDA AND AMMAN.

FCO TELNO 435 TO BEIRUT: LEBANON: U. S. MARINES

THE U.S. MARINES HAVE SUFFERED, AT THE LATEST COUNT, AT LEAST 146 KILLED IN THE BOMB ATTACK ON ITS HEADQUARTERS, IN LEBANON THIS MORNING - THE LARGEST NUMBER OF CASUALTIES IN A SINGLE INCIDENT IN ITS HISTORY OF THE U.S. MARINE CORPS. AS THE MEDICAL AND NEXT OF KIN RECORDS WERE DESTROYED IN THE EXPLOSION, THEY ARE HAVING THE UTMOST DIFFICULTY IN CONTACTING THE FAMILIES.

2. AS WE ARE REPORTING ON OTHER CHANNELS THE AMERICANS THINK THAT THE EVIDENCE (CIRCUMSTANTIAL AND INTELLIGENCE) POINTS TO IRANIAN GROUPS OPERATING IN CONJUNCTION WITH EXTREMIST ELEMENTS OF THE LEBANESE SHIA. THEY DO NOT THINK THE SYRIANS WERE INVOLVED.

3. THE PRESIDENT RETURNED IMMEDIATELY FROM GEORGIA AND MADE A STATEMENT ON ARRIVAL IN WASHINGTON, REAFFIRMING AMERICAN RESOLVE TO KEEP THE U.S. MARINES IN LEBANON TO FULFILL THEIR MISSION. A RESTRICTED N S C MEETING WAS HELD THIS MORNING AND A FURTHER EXTENDED ONE THIS AFTERNOON. THE DECISIONS SO FAR HAVE BEEN MODEST. THE KILLED AND WOUNDED ARE TO BE REPLACED AT ONCE

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(FRESH TROOPS ARE BEING EMBARKED THIS EVENING FROM SOUTH CAROLINA TO GO BY AIR TO BEIRUT), BUT THERE IS NO INTENTION AT THIS STAGE TO INCREASE THE NUMBERS OF U.S. TROOPS ASHORE. THE MARINE COMMANDANT GENERAL P.X. KELLY, IS ALSO FLYING TO BEIRUT TO LOOK INTO THE WHOLE SECURITY QUESTION.

4. URGENT CONSIDERATION IS BEING GIVEN TO WAYS TO RE-LOCATE THE MARINES ALREADY THERE IN MORE SECURE OR MORE DEFENSIBLE POSITIONS. ONE POSSIBILITY WHICH HAS BEEN RAISED IS THE TRANSFER OF THE MARINE HEADQUARTERS GROUP TO U.S. NAVAL VESSELS OFF SHORE. OTHER OPTIONS UNDER CONSIDERATION ARE DISPERSAL OF THE TROOPS ON SHORE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF BUNKERS FOR THOSE WHO ARE PARTICULARLY EXPOSED. THE CENTRAL PROBLEM REMAINS TO CONTROL THE AIRPORT. THE NSC HAVE BEEN CONSIDERING INTER ALIA WHAT SHOULD BE DONE ABOUT THE IRANAINS. THEIR SENSE OF OUTRAGE HAS BEEN INCREASED BY CONTINUED SNIPING AT RESCUE WORKERS TRYING TO RETRIEVE BODIES FROM THE RUINS.

5. EAGLEBURGER, WHO WAS PRESENT AT THIS AFTERNOON'S NSC MEETING, TOLD MINISTER TONIGHT THAT THE ONLY OTHER DECISION OF IMPORTANCE WAS THAT THE PRESIDENT SHOULD SEND MESSAGES TO MRS THATCHER AND OTHER HEADS OF GOVERNMENT OF COUNTRIES PARTICIPATING IN THE MNF. AS OF 0200Z THIS EVENING THE TEXT HAD NOT BEEN FINALISED, BUT EAGLEBURGER THOUGHT IT LIKELY THAT IT WOULD BE SENT OVERNIGHT AND WOULD CONTAIN A SUGGESTION FOR A MEETING OF THE FOUR MNF FOREIGN MINISTERS THIS WEEK. SHULTZ HAD SPOKEN TODAY TO CHEYSSON, BUT HAD IN EFFECT EXCHANGED NOTHING BEYOND CONDOLENCES. SHULTZ HAD CANCELLED A VISIT TO MEXICO AND EL SALVADOR WHICH HAD BEEN DUE TO START TOMORROW SO AS TO BE PRESENT IN WASHINGTON DURING THE NEXT FEW CRITICAL DAYS.

6. IT IS TOO SOON YET TO JUDGE WHAT EFFECTS THESE TRAGIC EVENTS (A DESCRIPTION WELL BORNE OUT BY THIS EVENING'S TV COVERAGE) MAY HAVE ON THE CONGRESSIONAL AND NATIONAL CONSENSUS IN FAVOUR OF KEEPING THE MARINES IN THE LEBANON. IN SEPARATE INTERVIEWS EARLIER TODAY SENATOR BIDEN (DEMOCRAT) URGED THE ADMINISTRATION TO TAKE TIME TO REFLECT AND TO TAKE NO HASTY DECISION TO PULL ITS MARINES OUT. SENATOR NUNN (DEMOCRAT) SAID THAT THE IMMEDIATE TASKS WERE TO RESTORE THE MARINE CONTINGENT IN BEIRUT TO ITS FULL COMPLEMENT AND TO IMPROVE ITS PROTECTION. BUT, NUNN ARGUED, THE MARINES' MISSION AS AT PRESENT DEFINED WAS IMPOSSIBLE AND SENATOR GLENN AND OTHER DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES HAVE ALSO BEEN CRITICAL OF THE LACK OF DEFINITION OF THE MISSION, WHILE USUALLY STOPPING SHORT OF A CALL TO PULL THEM OUT. ON THE REPUBLICAN SIDE, SENATOR HOWARD BAKER (REPUBLICAN LEADER IN THE SENATE) WAS REPORTED TO HAVE SENT A LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT THIS MORNING REHEARSING HIS OWN MISGIVINGS ABOUT THE DECISION TO INVOLVE THE US MARINES IN THE LEBANON IN THE FIRST PLACE. THE STATE DEPARTMENT (PROBABLY SHULTZ HIMSELF) WILL BE BRIEFING THE SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE AND SPEAKER O'NEILL TOMORROW WITH THE AIM OF TRYING TO HOLD CONGRESSIONAL OPINION FIRM.

WRIGHT