

MR. COLES *25/10*

CONFIDENTIAL

Prime Minister.

THE LEBANON

I was interested to see that, in the House of Commons and House of Lords yesterday, there was no serious ground-swell in favour of an immediate withdrawal of the British contingent from the MNF. In fact, those speakers who know something about the Middle East, were all in favour of our staying for the time being. This is obviously right. The European component of the MNF, if not the whole force, must stay or go together. Personally, I pray for a lull which will enable withdrawal with honour to take place.

Equally, pending progress or the lack of it in the forthcoming political negotiations between the Lebanese parties, there is no question of redefining the role of the MNF, as so many anxious critics would like us to do. It is not a practical possibility. However, although the role of the force may be difficult to define, there are positive elements to which we could draw more attention in public:-

i. There is no doubt that the mass of peaceful citizens of Beirut who are not involved in factional fighting would regard with great dismay the withdrawal of the MNF. It provides them with some sense of security without which they would regard a total civil war in and around Beirut as inevitable.

ii. The Palestinians in the refugee camps in South Beirut and those Palestinians scattered throughout the area would be horrified at the withdrawal of MNF protection and might well flee (probably ending up in Jordan). They would see themselves exposed to further massacres such as those which happened last year. Lord McNair made this good point in the House of Lords debate yesterday.

iii. It is probable that, without the deterrent of the MNF, the Lebanese Army might have collapsed in the recent fighting, thus bringing about a total civil war, not confined to the Chouf.

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In the light of the above, it is facile to argue that, just because the circumstances which led to the introduction of the MNF have changed, the force is now rudderless and meaningless.

In the immediate future, there are important points which we must bear in mind:-

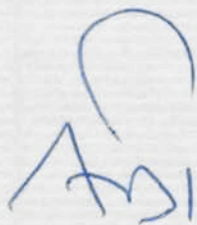
i. We must maintain the impartiality which our contingent (and the Italians) has so far preserved. We are fulfilling the useful function of guarding the Security Committee talks and have managed to keep on good terms with all the factions, notably the Druze. We must avoid being drawn into activity directed against any of the factions.

ii. We should counsel the Americans against presenting the situation in apocalyptic East/West terms, such as those employed in Reagan's recent pronouncements. Atrocities have been endemic to the Lebanese civil war in the last eight or nine years. There have been Palestinian massacres of Christians, Phalangist massacres of Palestinians, the Iraqi Embassy demolished as the American Embassy was some months ago, etc etc. Tens of thousands of people have been slaughtered. Frightful though the events of the weekend were, they fell within the murderous pattern which has followed the collapse of the Lebanese National Pact - nothing to do with the Cold War.

iii. I have little doubt in my mind that the atrocities were committed by a Shi'ite group. We shall almost certainly never know whether eg the Iranian Government connived at their action or even promoted it. However, national feeling in the United States will be so strong that the Americans are bound to look for an outside power against which to retaliate. The same might be true of the French. The Iranian Government is the most likely target, since both France and the United States have written off their relations with Iran. We should avoid being dragged into any such fruitless confrontation. We should not forget the contortions we had to endure to satisfy American public opinion over the hostages in Iran.

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It is obviously in our interest to do everything possible to generate rapid progress in the Geneva negotiations, if and when they get under way. The Americans are not participants, but they will probably have a senior official in Geneva to keep in touch with the Lebanese players behind the scenes. I wonder if the other MNF participants, including ourselves, should not consider doing the same. We have had excellent personal relations with most, if not all, the Lebanese concerned over many years. We and the Italians are in a better position to act as backstairs advisers than the Americans or the French, both of whom are too closely identified with the Maronites. There is no doubt that, if the MNF were a UN force, someone like Brian Urquhart would be present (although not at the meetings) to fulfil such a role.



A.D. PARSONS
25 October 1983

CONFIDENTIAL

TO BE CHECKED
AGAINST DELIVERY

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STATEMENT BY THE FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH SECRETARY ON THE
ON THE SITUATION IN LEBANON

Early in the morning of 23 October, in carefully co-ordinated attacks, two huge bombs exploded in premises in Beirut occupied by United States and French units of the Multinational force. At least 160 United States marines and 34 French troops were killed.

The whole House will wish to join me in expressing our deepest sympathy to the United States and France and to the families of all those who lost their lives in this tragedy. We condemn without qualification those responsible for this hideous act.

We have offered all possible help in the evacuation and treatment of casualties, both on the spot and in RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus. We are in the closest touch with our partners in the Multinational Force and with the Lebanese Government.

The safety of our troops is naturally uppermost in our minds at this time. The Commander-in-Chief, UK Land Forces, General Kitson is going to Beirut to consider on the spot what may need to be done.

I would like to pay tribute to the coolness and courage of our troops in difficult and dangerous circumstances. The

staff of our Embassy in Beirut is also to be commended.

The contributors to the MNF want one thing: the restoration of the Lebanese government's authority and the independence of the Lebanon. Without the presence of the MNF contingents it is very doubtful whether the fragile ceasefire, agreed on 26 September, would have come about. Our own contingent, at the request of all the parties concerned, has been providing a guard for the meetings of the Security Committee set up to discuss the implementation of the ceasefire.

National reconciliation talks are to open in Geneva on 31 October. In the light of this latest tragedy, it is now all the more important for all parties in Lebanon to get together urgently to settle their differences by negotiation.

Lebanon

4.12 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Sir Geoffrey Howe): Early in the morning of 23 October, in carefully co-ordinated attacks, two huge bombs exploded in premises in Beirut occupied by United States and French units of the multinational force. At least 160 United States marines and 34 French troops were killed.

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National reconciliation talks are to open in Geneva on the 31st of this month. In the light of this latest tragedy, it is now all the more important for all parties in Lebanon to get together urgently to settle their differences by negotiation.

Mr. Denis Healey (Leeds, East): I Join the right hon. and learned Gentleman in condemning the bombing and express our sympathy for the families of those who were killed or injured. I also welcome the help that British forces gave to casualties.

The horror and shock caused by an incident is still fresh in our minds and that is not the best time to take new decisions which might have long-term consequences. I hope that the Foreign Secretary agrees that the desire for revenge is not a good counsellor, especially when responsibility for the atrocities is obscure. Reprisals which are taken in the heat of anger can inflict suffering on the innocent and make existing circumstances even more difficult.

Can the Foreign Secretary confirm that a great deal of circumstantial evidence suggests that the bombings might be connected with the war in the Gulf, which has already caused up to one thousand times as many deaths as yesterday's bombings in Beirut? Can he confirm a report of a western initiative in the Security Council and that the Soviet Government are prepared to acquiesce to an end to the Gulf war? The Opposition would warmly welcome

such an initiative as the first sign of contact between Russia and the United States which might reduce the risk of their being dragged into direct confrontation against their will.

Yesterday's tragic events are bound to increase already widespread doubts about the role and purpose of the multinational force. It is quite clear that it has not kept the peace although it might, as the Foreign Secretary said, have contributed to the recent ceasefire. However, I must remind the Foreign Secretary that that is the 179th ceasefire in a civil war that has already lasted nearly 10 years.

Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the multinational force has not restored the authority of the Lebanese Government even in Beirut—the only area in which they have the authority to act—as the Shia Muslims have established a no-go area in West Beirut whence the bombings appear to have been launched?

It appears that almost any action taken by the multinational force is regarded by one group or another as hostile to it. Therefore, the only real role of that force is to act as sitting ducks for terrorist attack.

We want a successful outcome to the talks on national reconciliation as much as the Foreign Secretary. However, I hope that the Foreign Secretary agrees that those talks can succeed only if the Gemayel Government are prepared to modify the 1943 constitution to give the 60 per cent. Muslim majority in Lebanon a fairer share of power. The Gemayel Government will have no incentive to make those concessions as long as we say, as the Prime Minister did in her joint press conference with President Mitterand last week, that the multinational force will stay until a government of national reconciliation is established. That is especially so as the multinational force has taken the side of the Gemayel Government in the civil war more than once.

I hope that the Foreign Secretary can assure us at the very least that there will be no increase in the British contingent. I hope that he can confirm what the Minister of State said on television yesterday—that the Government are reconsidering the wisdom of continuing to contribute to the multinational force. According to Mr. Cheysson yesterday, the French Government are reconsidering the French role.

I hope that the Foreign Secretary will keep the House regularly informed of developments as I believe that the House is now as sceptical as the United States Congress about the wisdom of continuing to make a contribution in existing circumstances.

Sir Geoffrey Howe: The right hon. Member for Leeds, East, (Mr. Healey) concluded by emphasising the wisdom of continuing to make a contribution in present circumstances. He was right to do that as the initial contribution and establishment of the force was supported by Opposition parties.

Mr. Healey: The right hon. and learned Gentleman must have misunderstood me. I said the exact opposite. I said that there is growing doubt about the wisdom of continuing to make a contribution. I did not say that I supported such a continuation without conditions.

Sir Geoffrey Howe: I was making no such misunderstanding. I was saying that the right hon. Gentleman concluded by dealing with the wisdom of continuing to make a contribution. I was merely reminding

him and the House that the establishment of the force and a British contingent's participation in it was accepted on both sides of the House. It was a difficult decision and it has remained so. The force is there to enhance the prospect of restoring the authority of the Government in an independent sovereign Lebanon on the basis of conciliation between the various groups in that country. The force cannot be expected to remain there indefinitely, but it will stay for so long as it plays a useful part in promoting the peace process. As I said in my initial answer, it is important for the Government of the Lebanon and all the factions and groups in that country to understand the urgent need for them to settle their differences by a process of conciliation, which means changes on all sides. At present, there is no intention to change the role or size of the force but, clearly, all those countries contributing to the multinational force will now need to reconsider that matter.

Everyone would have wished the force to have established a durable ceasefire, but to have established this breathing space and an opportunity for conciliation to be taken a stage further is at least a step forward. The tragedy of yesterday is a measure of the price that the dozen countries, not only European countries, which are deploying more than 10,000 troops in various groups in the area, are prepared to pay to promote peace there. They are paying a heavy price for doing that. I reiterate the hope that those in the Lebanon who are directly involved, will move with a sense of urgency to settle their differences in the light of the sacrifices being made by the rest of the world on their behalf.

Mr. Healey: Will the Foreign Secretary confirm my interpretation of his concluding remarks, which is that the Government are not giving those involved in the talks a blank cheque to continue indefinitely, as the Prime Minister suggested last week? Will he confirm that if rapid progress is not made towards a durable settlement, he will consult with the other Governments contributing to the multinational force with a view to withdrawing it?

Sir Geoffrey Howe: We are in close consultation with the other Governments. I spent the weekend with the Foreign Secretaries of the European contributors to the multinational force and with the Foreign Secretaries of those countries which intend to contribute to the new observer force that may be sent to the Lebanon. I shall certainly keep in touch with those countries, and keep the House closely informed.

Several Hon. Members rose—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I know that the House is interested in this important subject, but right hon. and hon. Members should ask short questions, as we have a big day ahead of us.

Mr. Julian Amery (Brighton, Pavilion): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that whatever doubts there may originally have been about contributing to the peacekeeping force, a withdrawal on Britain's part today would be seen as a capitulation to terrorism? Does he further agree that without the multinational peacekeeping force we would be faced with a Syrian-Soviet occupation of the Lebanon, which could not conceivably be in the interests of the West or of world peace?

Sir Geoffrey Howe: As my right hon. Friend suggested, a Syrian-Soviet occupation of the Lebanon

would be neither a sensible nor an attractive prospect for the West or world peace. That is one reason why we wish to see established an independent sovereign Lebanon without the intrusion of foreign forces and with the respect of neighbouring states. I also agree with my right hon. Friend that today is not the right time to question our presence in the multinational force, nor to reach a conclusion such as he suggested.

Mr. J. Enoch Powell (Down, South): What useful result do the Government think will be achieved by the stationing in the Lebanon of 97 British troops?

Sir Geoffrey Howe: The 97 British troops form part of a much larger force that contains three other national contributors. Their presence on behalf of the United Kingdom, together with representatives of 11 other nations, represents peoples committed to the process of recreating peaceful conditions in which an independent sovereign Lebanese Government can survive. If that were to happen, if our presence were to prevent from happening events such as those referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Mr. Amery) and if it were to prevent the outbreak of the sort of slaughter that we have seen so often in other parts of the world, it would be a useful result.

Sir Anthony Kershaw (Stroud): While recognising that we should not break with our allies at this time, will my right hon. and learned Friend take steps to dispel the impression that he is in favour of withdrawing our troops from Belize—where they are safely and efficiently doing a most important job—but wishes them to remain in the Lebanon, where they are manifestly doing no good and may be doing harm at considerable danger to themselves?

Sir Geoffrey Howe: I say nothing about the first matter, which does not arise out of my statement. I do not accept my hon. Friend's conclusion that our troops in Lebanon are doing no good, but considerable harm.

Mr. Roy Hughes (Newport, East): Does not this incident illustrate yet again that in that region we should be pursuing a policy far more independent of American policy? Why does not the Foreign Secretary encourage a joint United States and Soviet Union initiative, leading to a Geneva conference to which all parties to the Palestinian and the Lebanon disputes could be invited?

Sir Geoffrey Howe: I would welcome a spread of the areas in which the Soviet Union was willing to play its part in contributing to the process of peacekeeping in other parts of the world. I take the opportunity to answer the point raised by the right hon. Member for Leeds, East (Mr. Healey) in relation to Iraq, which arises on this question. There is no reason at present to conclude, although the facts are not certain, that there is a link between this incident and the war between Iraq and Iran in the Gulf. It remains a possibility, but it is certain that initiatives may be undertaken soon in the United Nations with a view to securing a conclusion that may lay the foundations for an end to the war in the Gulf. If such a resolution were to pass the Security Council, it would need the concurrence of the Soviet Union, and that remains to be seen. The passing of such a resolution would not bring about an end to the war, but it is being considered closely by the Government and by several other countries.

Mr. Robert Atkins (South Ribble): Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware that several hon. and noble Members of both Houses recently visited Cyprus and saw at first hand the support work carried out by British forces in Cyprus for the MNF in Lebanon? Will he convey to his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence our favourable impressions of the work that they do and the support that they give so well? Will he comment on the emphasis that that gives to the importance of Cyprus in relation to the conflict in the middle east?

Sir Geoffrey Howe: I take note of what my hon. Friend says and welcome his tribute to the role played and the work carried out by Her Majesty's forces. I hope very much that that will go out as the general view of hon. Members on both sides of the House, thus contributing to the support that the troops need for their difficult task.

Mr. Russell Johnston (Inverness, Nairn and Lochaber): May I associate the Liberal party with the sympathy expressed for the French and American soldiers in what was without doubt, as the Secretary of State said, a most hideous crime? I congratulate the Secretary of State on retaining a presence in Beirut that has been careful, low-key but nevertheless supportive of a peaceful solution. I ask him not to wash his hands of the matter hastily. He must make an assessment of the value of what our troops are doing, but he must not do that without the most careful consultation with the other forces involved. I hope that he will do that.

Sir Geoffrey Howe: I am grateful for what the hon. Gentleman said.

Mr. Patrick McNair-Wilson (New Forest): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the most important factor in Lebanese politics is the complex confessional structure of the country? Can he explain how he believes that foreign army patrols will help the Lebanese Government to resolve those problems, and will he tell the House why we are supporting this Lebanese Government rather than any other?

Sir Geoffrey Howe: This Lebanese Government was elected under the constitution — [HON. MEMBERS: "When?"] The President of the Lebanese Government was elected by an overwhelming majority of the Lebanese Parliament, in which all Lebanese groups are represented. I ask my hon. Friend to bear it in mind that in such matters it is not for the House or for any group to invent or to design new Governments or new Government institutions. We must start with the institutions that exist. We are there in response to an invitation offered by the Lebanese Government, and it is right that we moved in on that basis for the purpose that I have described.

Mr. Andrew Faulds (Warley, East): As United States policy is notable for its partisanship in the middle east generally—that is to understate it—and as the United States fleet has already heavily attacked one of the parties to the internal disagreement in the Lebanon, does not the right hon. and learned Gentleman think it advisable to tell the President and his business cronies, who do not have a clue about these matters, to get out of the middle east altogether?

Sir Geoffrey Howe: The hon. Gentleman takes a characteristically eccentric and unhelpful view of the basis of the American role in the area. The United States is in

the area because of its conclusion that its presence contributes to the prospect of a peaceful solution to the difficult problems there.

Mr. John Stokes (Halesowen and Stourbridge): Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware that unfortunately it may be a long time indeed before there is either a political or military solution in the Lebanon? That being so, would it not be wise to move our troops, if possible along with other troops there, to safer locations, as they are bound to be there for a long time?

Sir Geoffrey Howe: I understand my hon. Friend's point that, inevitably, risk is involved in the deployment of troops in these circumstances. That is why we wish to see a conclusion to the uncertainty as soon as possible. However, were the troops to be removed altogether, they would not contribute to the role that they have so far performed. As I have already said, it is right for those involved in the Lebanon to recognise the need to proceed with the utmost urgency towards a resolution of this problem.

Mr. John Cartwright (Woolwich): Does the Secretary of State agree that it would be unwise for the British contingent to be seen to be taking sides in the internal and increasingly bloody politics of the Lebanon? Will he continue to resist calls for its removal while it is able to make a positive and helpful contribution towards bringing the parties together in the search for national reconciliation?

Sir Geoffrey Howe: It is, of course, right to take account of the extent to which it can make a positive and helpful contribution. It is on that basis that the troops went, and remain, there. I emphasise that the British troops are taking no sides in this conflict. One reason underlining that fact is the role that they are at present playing at the invitation of all the parties concerned. That is a plain recognition of their independence.

Mr. Mark Lennox-Boyd (Morecambe and Lunesdale): Will my right hon. and learned Friend deny the suggestions that we are involved in the Lebanon because we are subservient to American foreign policy? Will he confirm that our presence there, rightly or wrongly, was a response to requests by the Lebanese Government, whom we wish to help, as a friendly but frail Government, to bring that country forward after years of turmoil and horror?

Sir Geoffrey Howe: I confirm what my hon. Friend has said and remind him that among the different contingents of troops at present playing a peace-keeping role in the Lebanon there are representatives of countries in Africa and outside western Europe, who plainly would not be there at the behest of the American Government. There are contingents in Lebanon trying to play their part in different ways in promoting the peace process, and it would be quite wrong to conclude that we are there in any sense as a lackey of the United States Government.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): A family of constituents whose son is at present in Beirut have expressed great concern at the situation in Lebanon. I am sure that they will note that a senior representative is shortly to visit Beirut. Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give an assurance that there has already been an urgent review of security at the base and of the

accommodation of our contingent with a view to preventing the sort of kamikaze attack that was yesterday perpetrated in Beirut?

Sir Geoffrey Howe: I well understand the hon. Gentleman expressing his concern on behalf of the family of one of those serving in the present difficult situation in Beirut. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has been concerned with the question he raised. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Defence recently visited the Lebanon as did the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office in recent weeks. As a result of all their assessments and the assessment now being undertaken by the officer commanding United Kingdom forces, the very questions raised by the hon. Gentleman have been considered and will be reconsidered in the light of the latest report.

Mr. Cyril D. Townsend (Bexleyheath): While a responsible Government will wish to review the presence of British troops in the Lebanon on a day-to-day basis, would not this be the worst possible moment unilaterally to withdraw our contingent from the multinational force? Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware that, beyond the complexities of the political theme in the Lebanon, lies a real risk of conflict between the big powers and, therefore, any contribution which Britain can make towards helping the Lebanese Government to secure a peaceful settlement is warmly to be welcomed? Although he will look at the Lebanon on a day-to-day basis, will he also keep at the back of his mind the need for Europe to point the way to a wider settlement of the middle east dispute?

Sir Geoffrey Howe: I shall certainly consider my hon. Friend's last point. That question is not only in my mind but in the minds of the other Foreign Ministers of the Ten. I entirely agree that even if it were under consideration, today, at a time when the forces of other countries have suffered such a severe blow, would be quite the wrong moment to consider unilateral withdrawal.

Mr. Dick Douglas (Dunfermline, West): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the British presence in the multinational force was not debated in this House and that, unlike the United States Congress, we have not been asked to pronounce upon it? What is his view of the criticism of the presence of the United States in the Lebanon by such distinguished people as Dr. Kissinger and the fact that there is resistance to the United States entrenching its position in the Lebanon?

Sir Geoffrey Howe: I have no doubt that the opinions expressed inside and outside Congress are as diverse as those in this House. I understand that my opposite number, Secretary of State George Shultz, will in the next day or two engage in just such an exchange as this in Congress.

Mr. Tony Marlow (Northampton, North): Will my right hon. and learned Friend tell the Americans in the

nicest possible way that their policies in the middle east are likely to be more successful if they do not take one side in a cross-factional conflict, that President Gemayel was put in place by Members of Parliament elected some 12 years ago—before Lord Wilson's last Administration—and several civil wars ago, and that he has completely destroyed his credibility within the Lebanon by fighting alongside the Fascist forces of the Phalange, the people who perpetrated the massacres in Sabra and Chatila? Will he also remind the Americans that Syria is there, is likely to remain there and should be taken account of?

Sir Geoffrey Howe: It is right that we should all take account of the presence, interest and role of Syria and the Syrian Government, because they have legitimate security concerns of which we should all take account. However, the differences that exist within the Lebanon are in the last resort to be settled by the Lebanese themselves. Whatever may be said by my hon. Friend, we cannot create a constitutional framework other than that which exists for such differences to be solved. I have no doubt that the American and every other Government concerned try as best they may to reach an honest conclusion as to the objective road to follow. That is the purpose of us all.

Mr. David Young (Bolton, South-East): I was a member of the recent delegation to Cyprus, and one soldier, recently arrived from the Lebanon, asked me "As a soldier my job is to serve where I am sent, but will you as a politician tell me what I am doing in the Lebanon anyway?". Are we putting 97 men there to follow the cause of peace or are they there as pawns in a fight which some hon. Members see as a battle between the West and the East? If we put men there, it is our duty to ensure that they are impartial and not in support of one regime or another.

Sir Geoffrey Howe: Of course it is right that they should be seen to be present impartially. That is the case that I have made this afternoon, and that is widely accepted in the House. They are there to serve the cause of peace. Unfortunately in today's world such service requires soldiers from many countries to serve in some most unattractive and remarkable situations, but that is the purpose of their presence there.

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): Before these questions end, will the right hon. and learned Gentleman dissociate himself from President Reagan's comment that he intends to seek revenge? Revenge has dominated Lebanese politics since the inception of that country, and if that is the policy that the United States Administration intend to pursue there is little hope of peace in the Lebanon this week, next week or at any time in the future.

Sir Geoffrey Howe: The United States has explained the purpose of its presence there—to further the cause of peace and to promote the prospect of an established, strong and independent Lebanon.