



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

17 November, 1983

LEBANON: BRITISH CONTINGENT IN MULTI-NATIONAL FORCE

The Prime Minister held a meeting at 1935 hrs this evening to discuss the situation of the British contingent in the Multi-National Force. The meeting was attended by the Defence Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, Mr. Luce, the Chief of the General Staff and Mr. Egerton.

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Accounts of threats to the Multi-National Force were received frequently. Arrangements were being made for scout cars to be placed tonight at the three approach roads to the location of the British contingent and to be maintained there during hours of darkness. It would be difficult for a lorry carrying explosives to penetrate this barrier. He was also examining the possibility of arranging for those members of our contingent who were off-duty to be moved to a naval ship offshore. He would report further on this. In addition, our protection arrangements were being reviewed and the Commanding Officer in Cyprus would be visiting Beirut tomorrow, principally to consider the detailed planning relating to the stationing of off-duty troops on board ship.

The Chief of the General Staff then explained these arrangements in more detail.

The Defence Secretary said that there remained the political issue of whether it was right for the British contingent to remain in the Lebanon. The French air strike in the Bekaa today increased the threat to the Multi-National Force as a whole. The Prime Minister said that there was a danger that those who wished to attack the Force would go for its most vulnerable component. Were we in the

most suitable area? The Chief of the Defence Staff explained that three options for moving the Force had been considered but all had disadvantages and the Commanding Officer was in favour of staying in his present location. The Prime Minister asked whether flights by Buckaneer aircraft over Beirut would improve morale or be regarded as provocative. The Defence Secretary said that he felt that people would reach the conclusion, in the light of recent events, that the purpose of any Buckaneer flights was to prepare a strike.

The Prime Minister reverted to the question of how long it was right for our contingent to stay in Beirut. The Defence Secretary and the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary agreed that by local standards the ceasefire arrangements were being maintained reasonably well. Mr. Egerton pointed out that on 16 November the Lebanese President and the Syrian Foreign Minister had agreed on arrangements to shore up the ceasefire.

The Defence Secretary said that he thought it would be unwise in the present circumstances to pull out unilaterally. The Prime Minister said that she was inclined to agree. We had had several intelligence reports of threats to our contingent and none had so far proved correct.

The Defence Secretary asked whether it would not be wise to make a further enquiry of the U.S. Administration as to their intentions. After further discussion, it was agreed that a message would be prepared for the Prime Minister's consideration - this would draw attention to the fact that she would be absent at CHOGM for a period beginning on 21 November and that it would be helpful to know before she left London whether the United States had abandoned its plans for some form of retaliation for the attack on the U.S. contingent.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that the pattern of violence in the Lebanon tended to diminish the value of the Multi-National Force. Should we also raise this with the United States Administration? The Prime Minister thought that this would not be the right moment to raise this more general question with President Reagan.

The Chief of the General Staff stated that it might be necessary to send a few additional troops to join our contingent to help with the job of patrolling and guarding the ceasefire talks. The need for this was created by the new task of manning check-points. The Defence Secretary said that it would be wise to delay a decision until we could arrange for a naval ship to receive off-duty personnel. It was agreed that a suitable naval ship should be diverted to the area as soon as possible. Thought should be given to the public presentation of any such move.

Mr. Luce pointed out that H.M. Embassy in Beirut was also at risk, though certain measures of protection were in hand.

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It was agreed that the Defence Secretary would report further to the Prime Minister after tomorrow's visit to Beirut by O.C. British Forces Cyprus.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Peter Ricketts (Foreign and Commonwealth Office).

A. L. COLES

Richard Mottram, Esq.,  
Ministry of Defence

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