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Prime Minister

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TO IMMEDIATE F.C.O.

TELEGRAM NUMBER 737 OF 27 DECEMBER 1983

INFO IMMEDIATE DAMASCUS, TEL AVIV, PARIS, ROME, WASHINGTON, MODUK

PRIORITY CBFC

SAVING BRITFORLEB

LEBANON

1. THE PRESIDENT, FLANKED BY THE PRIME MINISTER, CHAIRED THE MNF COORDINATION MEETING ON 27 DECEMBER. WE WERE GIVEN AN ACCOUNT OF THE FIGHTING IN BEIRUT OVER THE LAST THREE DAYS, DETAILS OF WHICH BRITFORLEB HAVE BEEN REPORTING ON THEIR CHANNELS TO MOD.

2. FIGHTING STARTED ON THE NIGHT OF 23/4 DECEMBER WHEN AMAL CHALLENGED THE OCCUPATION BY THE LEBANESE ARMY OF THREE POSITIONS ON THE NORTH-WESTERN EDGE OF THE 'NO GO' AREA WHICH THE FRENCH HAD HANDED OVER TO THE LAF EARLIER THAT DAY. THE LAF MAINTAIN THESE POSITIONS AND HAVE RE-INFORCED THEIR HOLD ON THE MAIN ROUTES LINKING THEM. THEY CLAIM TO HAVE SEALED OFF THE 'NO GO' AREA FROM THE REST OF THAT PART OF THE CITY, INCLUDING THE ADJACENT AREAS OF SABRA AND SHATILA.

3. WITH THE ISF THE ARMY ARE CURRENTLY SEARCHING THE SABRA AND SHATILA CAMPS FOR ARMS AND INFILTRATORS. SO FAR, ACCORDING TO THE LEBANESE, 92 HAVE BEEN ARRESTED, INCLUDING 52 NON-LEBANESE (MOSTLY PALESTINIANS). MEANWHILE A PRECARIOUS CEASEFIRE IS IN BEING.

4. THE ITALIAN AMBASSADOR COMPLAINED ABOUT THE LACK OF ANY PRIOR CONSULTATION WITH HIS FORCE COMMANDER BEFORE THE LAF BEGAN THE OPERATION IN PARA 3 ABOVE. HE ALSO EXPRESSED CONCERN THAT THE LAF SHOULD HAVE SELECTED FOR SUCH AN OPERATION THE AREA OF THE REFUGEE CAMPS WHICH THE ITALIANS CONTROL RATHER THAN PARTS OF THE 'NO GO' AREA ITSELF. PRESIDENT GEMAYEL EXPLAINED THAT HIS GOVERNMENT

OPERATION IN PARA 3 ABOVE. HE ALSO EXPRESSED CONCERN THAT THE LAF SHOULD HAVE SELECTED FOR SUCH AN OPERATION THE AREA OF THE REFUGEE CAMPS WHICH THE ITALIANS CONTROL RATHER THAN PARTS OF THE 'NO GO' AREA ITSELF. PRESIDENT GEMAYEL EXPLAINED THAT HIS GOVERNMENT WANTED TO PREVENT THE ANARCHY IN THE 'NO GO' AREA FROM SPREADING TO THE REST OF WEST BEIRUT. DESPITE EFFORTS BY THE LAF AND MNF TO STEM THE FLOW THE CAMPS HAD BEEN RE-INFILTRATED BY GUNMEN. THESE HAD TO BE REMOVED, OTHERWISE THE CANCER WOULD CONTINUE TO SPREAD. THE OPERATION, ACCORDING TO GEMAYEL, HAD THE SUPPORT OF MAINLINE SUNNI OPINION AND THAT OF MODERATE SHIA, BOTH GROUPS FEARING AN EVENTUAL TAKE-OVER OF LARGE PARTS OF THE CITY BY ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISTS. THE LEBANESE ARMY WOULD BE TAKING OVER FURTHER POSITIONS FROM THE MNF, MOSTLY IN WEST BEIRUT; BEFORE THEY COULD DO SO THEY NEEDED TO SEAL OFF AREAS FROM WHICH RESISTANCE TO THAT TAKEOVER COULD BE EXPECTED TO COME. (TWO MORE FRENCH POSITIONS - IN RAOUCHE AND ON CORNICH MAZRAA - HAVE BEEN HANDED TO THE LAF SINCE THE WEEKEND'S FIGHTING.)

5. COORDINATION BETWEEN THE LEBANESE ARMY AND THE MNF CONTINGENTS HAS ONCE AGAIN BEEN LESS THAT SATISFACTORY. BUT THE FAULT MAY NOT BE ALL ON THE SIDE OF THE LEBANESE. THERE IS CONSIDERABLE DOUBT ABOUT THE DEGREE OF COORDINATION BETWEEN THE FRENCH AND LEBANESE ON 23 DECEMBER. THE FRENCH CERTAINLY DID NOT ALERT THEIR MNF PARTNERS OF THEIR INTENTION TO WITHDRAW FROM THEIR POSITIONS ON THAT DAY. THE ITALIANS HAVE SOME GROUNDS FOR COMPLAINT. EQUALLY THE LEBANESE HAVE SOME JUSTIFICATION FOR THEIR PLEA (WHICH PRESIDENT GEMAYEL HIMSELF MADE) THAT MNF CONTRIBUTORS SHOULD KEEP THE LEBANESE AUTHORITIES FULLY INFORMED OF ANY PLANS FOR RE-DEPLOYING THEIR FORCES IN AND AROUND BEIRUT.

6. THE LEBANESE ARMY APPEAR TO HAVE SURVIVED ANOTHER ATTEMPT BY THE SHIA TO KNOCK THEM OFF THEIR PERCH. SO LONG AS THERE IS NO CONSENSUS IN FAVOUR OF THE ARMY RE-OCCUPYING THE SOUTHERN SUBURBS THEY WILL CONTINUE TO FACE SUCH CHALLENGES FROM THEM. THE ARMY CAN MAINTAIN A TIGHT CORDON ROUND THE AREA FOR ONLY LIMITED PERIODS MEANWHILE AND OPERATIONS OUTSIDE THE 'NO GO' AREA (AS IN PARA 3 ABOVE) CAN ONLY BE TEMPORARY PALLIATIVES. THERE IS YET NO SIGN OF A POLITICAL WILL AMONG THE VARIOUS LEBANESE PARTIES TO CONFRONT THE SHI'ITE EXTREMISTS IN THEIR REDOUBT. THE SITUATION IS, AND IS LIKELY TO REMAIN FOR SOME TIME TO COME, EXTREMELY VOLATILE.

PALMER
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