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SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE

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24/5

Falkland Islands: HMS Endurance

1. As you know, we may be at a critical stage on the Falklands dispute. I am minuting separately to the Prime Minister and OD colleagues, setting out the present position and seeking political and financial authority to carry our civil contingency planning forward. In advance of an OD meeting on the Falklands, you may wish to consider whether it would also be helpful at this stage to circulate to colleagues the contingency paper which your officials have prepared on the defence aspects.

2. While we may still hope that a continuation of negotiations with Argentina will be possible, we must, I think, accept that this is unlikely. Information from secret sources indicates that the Argentines may be prepared to take early action to withdraw Argentine services to the Islands. If they do, there will be two main problems: how to replace them; and how to demonstrate to public opinion here and to the Islanders our commitment to support them. Detailed arrangements for a replacement of Argentine services will inevitably take some time. We must recognise that we could face criticism if we appear unable to step into the breach quickly.

3. There is one action we could take which would be an immediate demonstration of our support for the islands: that is to maintain HMS Endurance on station in Falklands waters for the time being. This would serve as a visible sign of our commitment, would be an appropriate signal to the Argentines and could allow us to provide practical assistance if necessary. I appreciate that this would cause difficulties, not least for the captain and crew of the ship at the end of their long season, and that such a solution could only be temporary. But the latest incident, on


/South Georgi



South Georgia, indicates how vulnerable we are and how important a role HMS Endurance can play. I think therefore that it would be of the greatest assistance if contingency plans could now be made for HMS Endurance to remain on station in the area of the Islands after the rotation of the Marine Garrison is completed at the end of this month. Indeed I suspect that our position, both here and in the Islands, would become politically untenable if HMS Endurance were not to remain on station beyond the date of her scheduled departure.

4. This of course leaves on one side the broader question of HMS Endurance's future. As you know, I believe that it must be retained for at least another year. The South Georgia incident has obviously reinforced the case for this. This is something we shall need to look at in OD fairly soon.

5. I am copying this minute to the Prime Minister and to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.


(CARRINGTON)

Foreign and Commonwealth Office
24 March 1982