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ABR25 – FCO NOTE – POSITION OF THE ISLANDERS IN A BLOCKADE (cab 148/212)

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25 April 1982

CABINET

DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

SUB-COMMITTEE ON THE SOUTH ATLANTIC AND
THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

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FALKLAND ISLANDS: POSITION OF THE ISLANDERS
IN A BLOCKADE

Note by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office
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The attached note, prepared by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in consultation with the Ministry of Defence, is circulated for the information of the Sub-Committee.

Signed ROBERT ARMSTRONG
R L WADE-GERY
R L L FACER

Cabinet Office

25 April 1982

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FALKLAND ISLANDS : POSITION OF THE ISLANDERS IN A
BLOCKADE

(Note for information prepared by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in consultation with the Ministry of Defence).

PRESENT POSITION OF THE ISLANDERS

1. About 100 civilians have left the Islands since the Argentine invasion. Most have done so by the regular Argentine passenger aircraft which flies between the Islands every two or three days. A group is said to be coming out today, 23 April, and another next Tuesday (27 April). The Argentines appear content that they should do so.

2. Most of the Islanders appear now to have left Port Stanley for the relative safety of 'the Camp'. While some may want to stay put for the present to watch how things go there have been reports that some are apprehensive about being involved in cross-fire, and are looking for guidance from HMG about what they should do. In present circumstances we cannot obtain a clear view of the wishes of the majority, but as the Task Force gets nearer and tension rises, it seems likely that the Islanders' feelings of uncertainty will grow, and that more will wish to leave the Islands, at least temporarily. This tendency may be encouraged by the Government's recent statement that HMG will give sympathetic help to Islanders who want to go, but who are prevented by lack of means.

3. The ICRC have been pressing the Argentines to allow them a presence on the Islands, on general humanitarian grounds. The Argentines have turned them down, but the ICRC are continuing their efforts. The ICRC do not want publicity for this.

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EFFECTS OF A BLOCKADE

4. Once the Task Force have established a blockade, the Islanders will be subject to additional risks. First, supplies of food and other essentials will run low. Our present understanding is that while supplies may be adequate for a month or so, there are already some shortages. Second, although the Argentines have so far treated the Islanders correctly, we cannot exclude the possibility that they will resort to more brutal methods. Third, this likelihood would be increased if hostilities in the Island were to break out, when there would also be a risk of the Islanders suffering casualties.

5. In all these circumstances, the Government could face strong criticism for disregarding the Islanders' fate once a blockade has got underway, and might be pressed to arrange to evacuate them by some means or other.

POSSIBILITIES

6. In order to be effective, a blockade would seek to interdict all aircraft movement: aircraft cannot be stopped or searched, or interrogated with any degree of confidence. Once a blockade was in place, it is in any case unlikely that the air transport arrangements described in paragraph 1 above would continue. The Argentines would not want to place civil aircraft at risk merely in order to ferry Islanders to the mainland. They also might see advantage in keeping the Islanders where they are, in the hope that their presence would make us think twice before launching an invasion. We cannot rule out the possibility that they might seek to break a blockade by telling us that they were flying Islanders out in aircraft which they were in effect using for military purposes.

7. The concept of evacuation of non-belligerents by sea is a familiar one. In many past cases, ships belonging to a third country have been used and supervised by a neutral

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organisation. It is also possible for forces mounting a blockade to preserve its integrity while allowing a ship to pass through: in the last resort a ship, unlike an aircraft, can be stopped and searched.

8. In the circumstances of the Falklands, this would suggest the use of the ICRC to arrange, with the concurrence of the Argentines, for ships of a third country to take people to a neutral port such as Montevideo; or that the Swiss Embassy or (depending on the state of their involvement at the time) the Americans might assume this responsibility.

9. There would be advantage in seeking to involve the ICRC in this matter in the near future. The earlier HMG does this, the less it will attract later criticism that it had not done everything possible to help those Islanders who wished to leave temporarily.

10. The Swiss Embassy in Buenos Aires and the Americans should be informed in confidence of any new approach to the ICRC. There are advantages in keeping them in the picture, in case they can help.

ACTION TAKEN

11. (a) We have encouraged the ICRC to continue their efforts to seek a presence on the Islands, telling them that inter alia we would wish them to -
- (i) report on the condition of the Islanders, including an estimate of how many may wish to leave; and
 - (ii) consider the modalities by which they might be enabled to do so.
- (b) We are informing the Swiss Embassy in Buenos Aires and the Americans in confidence of this.