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JUL05 – REUNION DE GABINETE # 64 (1015 hs) (cab 148/211)

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OD(SA)(82) 64th Meeting

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CABINET

DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

SUB-COMMITTEE ON THE SOUTH ATLANTIC AND
THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
MONDAY 5 JULY 1982 at 10.15 am

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon William Whitelaw MP
Secretary of State for the
Home Department

The Rt Hon John Nott MP
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon Cecil Parkinson MP
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
and Paymaster General

THE FOLLOWING WERE ALSO PRESENT

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

Admiral of the Fleet
Sir Terence Lewin
Chief of the Defence Staff

Sir Antony Acland
Foreign and Commonwealth Office

SECRETARIAT

Sir Robert Armstrong
Mr A D S Goodall
Mr R L L Facer

SUBJECT

SITUATION IN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC

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SITUATION IN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC

THE CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE STAFF said that a total of 593 Argentine prisoners remained in British hands: these included the 10 captured on South Thule and 35 engineers who had volunteered to help with mine clearing. Details had been given to the International Committee of the Red Cross. The prisoners were now living on board ship at Port Stanley and there was no special urgency about getting them away. One of the Argentine volunteers had been injured in the course of mine clearing operations. Rehabilitation on the Islands was proceeding and Port Stanley airfield was now usable to its full width. The matting required for temporary extension of the airfield was expected to be in place before the end of August and would have a life of about 2 years. An early decision would be required on whether the airfield was to be permanently extended since the construction work involved would also take about 2 years. Because of shortage of accommodation as well as for other reasons, an urgent priority was to reduce force levels on the Islands: deterrence against the continuing medium term risk of Argentine military harassment would be less a matter of the size of the garrison than of the presence of a nuclear submarine and Phantom aircraft.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that there would appear to be no alternative to authorising the permanent extension of Port Stanley airfield: considerable expenditure would clearly have to be incurred in order to establish the Islands' viability. The question whether to return the Argentine prisoners on the basis of a unilateral British statement that active hostilities were at an end would need to be addressed in the light of the outstanding Argentine reply to the latest British message which had been delivered by the Swiss Embassy in Buenos Aires on 2 July. It would be helpful to have a military assessment of the pros and cons of returning all or some of the prisoners in the absence of explicit Argentine acceptance that hostilities were at an end. She noted that there would be legal justification for maintaining the Total Exclusion Zone and the 12 mile restriction (at least on Argentine submarines) as long as there was no formal cessation of hostilities: the question whether to maintain these restrictions, and if so in what form, would also need to be considered in the light of the Argentine reply to the latest British message.

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The Sub-Committee

1. Invited the Defence Secretary to prepare an assessment of the military arguments for and against returning the Argentine prisoners, on the lines indicated by the Prime Minister in her summing up.
2. Invited the Defence Secretary, in consultation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Attorney General, to make recommendations as to the continuation in force of the Total Exclusion Zone and the 12 mile restriction in the light of the Argentine response to the latest British message.

Cabinet Office

5 July 1982

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