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OD(SA)(82) 58th 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
Thursday 17 June 1982 at 10.00 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 Francis Pym MP
Secretary of State for Foreign
and Commonwealth Affairs

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

Sir Michael Palliser
Cabinet Office

SECRETARIAT

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

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1. MILITARY ISSUES

THE CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE STAFF after reporting on the military situation, said that the number of Argentine prisoners taken following the surrender at Port Stanley was now estimated at 10,600, but this was subject to further checking. Canberra, with 5,000 on board, would be ready to sail from Port Stanley that day and Norland was loading at San Carlos. But Argentina had declined to admit British ships and wanted the prisoners repatriated via Montevideo, where the water was thought to be too shallow to admit Canberra (this was being investigated further). In any case, Canberra could not carry 5,000 men as far as Montevideo: some 2,000 would have to be off-loaded. Chile was unwilling to admit Argentine prisoners without Argentine agreement, which had been refused. Arrangements were being made for a message to go to the Argentine Commander South Atlantic seeking a safe conduct for Canberra, with 5,000 prisoners to sail to Comodoro Rivadavia.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that British ships could not be asked to sail to Argentine ports without either a full cessation of hostilities or a guarantee of safe conduct. Pressure on Argentina to respond positively to British messages should be maintained. Meanwhile urgent action should be taken to apprise the Governments of Chile, the United States, Uruguay and Brazil of the full facts: the condition of the prisoners, the delays which repatriation other than direct to Argentina or Punta Arenas would involve: and the Argentine's unreadiness to receive their own soldiers or even permit British ships to use the nearest port outside Argentina. These facts should also be made known to Parliament. Britain was not seeking to exploit the prisoners to obtain political objectives: under the Geneva Convention there was no obligation to repatriate prisoners until hostilities had ceased: but Britain was seeking, for humanitarian reasons, to repatriate a substantial number prematurely in return for a guarantee of safe conduct for the ships. She noted that the terms of the Geneva Convention made Argentina responsible for the costs of repatriation from the point of embarkation.

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The Sub-Committee -

1. Invited the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, in consultation with the Defence Secretary, to arrange for urgent action to be taken with the Governments of Argentina, the United States, Chile, Uruguay and Brazil on the lines indicated in the Prime Minister's summing up.
2. Invited the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, in consultation with the Defence Secretary, to arrange for a summary to be prepared of the facts relating to the Argentine prisoners and their repatriation for use in answering questions in the House of Commons.

2. POLITICAL ISSUES

The Sub-Committee had before them a memorandum by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary (OD(SA)(82) 67) covering a draft Order in Council on the administration of the Falkland Islands.

THE FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH SECRETARY said that other member governments of the European Community, with the Federal Republic of Germany in the lead, were already taking steps to try to have Community economic sanctions against Argentina lifted. At the Foreign Ministers' meeting on 20 June he would argue strongly against this unless Argentina had by then agreed to a complete cessation of hostilities: and he would in any case seek to ensure that an arms embargo against Argentina was maintained for the time being. If partner governments insisted on lifting their economic sanctions, he would press for an understanding that the measures would be reapplied automatically if active hostilities broke out again.

The Sub-Committee -

1. Invited the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, in consultation with the Attorney General, to arrange for the proposed Order in Council on the administration of the Falkland Islands to be made as soon as possible.
2. Invited the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary to take the line he had described in discussion with his European Community colleagues about the maintenance of economic sanctions and an arms embargo against Argentina.

Cabinet Office

17 June 1982

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