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House of Commons PQs

PRIME MINISTER

ENGAGEMENTS

Q1. Mr. Gwilym Roberts

asked the Prime Minister if she will list her official engagements for Tuesday 4 May.

The Prime Minister (Mrs. Margaret Thatcher)

This morning I presided at a meeting of the Cabinet and had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others, including one with the right hon. Members for Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles (Mr. Steel) and for Plymouth, Devonport (Dr. Owen). In addition to my duties in the House I shall have further meetings later today.

Mr. Roberts

In view of the terrible loss of life in the South Atlantic and the rapidly escalating military confrontation, will the Prime Minister make a further effort today to reach a peaceful solution to the situation, involving probably the United Nations?

The Prime Minister

We all regret the loss of human life in the South Atlantic, but our first duty is to protect, and to minimise the danger to, our own forces in the South Atlantic, who are there because we all agreed that we should send a task force—

Mr. Cryer

I did not, so do not start dragging me into your rotten schemes.

Mr. Foulkes

I did not.

The Prime Minister

—because we all agreed that we must stop the invader, and because the vast majority of people in the House recognise that the best way to stop the trouble is to withdraw the forces from the Falkland Islands. Of course, the effort to seek a peaceful solution continues, and will continue vigorously. My right hon. Friend Francis Pym the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary will be reporting later on his visit to the United Nations. We shall pursue a peaceful settlement either there or through other means.

Sir Peter Emery

Will my right hon. Friend say over and over again that until the Argentine Government withdraw their troops from the Falkland Islands, every injury and fatality in the Southern Atlantic is absolutely due to the action of the Argentine junta?

[column 15]

The Prime Minister

Yes, it was the Argentines who broke the peace with unprovoked aggression. They are on British sovereign territory and there are British people under the heel of the junta. We sent the task force to rectify that situation. We hope to do so by all peaceful means and shall continue to try to do so. In the meantime, our first duty must be to protect our boys.

Mr. Foot

May I press the right hon. Lady on the question of the sinking of the cruiser and the tragic loss of life involved? We are all deeply concerned about it, just as we all are deeply aware that the origin of the crisis was the aggression by the Argentine. None the less, the Government have direct responsibilities in this matter, and the right hon. Lady especially so. Can she tell us what political control there was over this development, which was a major development? Can she say what calculations about the minimum use of force entered into those considerations?

Returning to the question put by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock (Mr. Roberts), can the right hon. Lady tell us exactly what are the next steps that will be taken by the Government to try to deal with the situation? There is always the danger that such an event as the sinking of the ship will recur and that it can put our Service men in danger. We on the Labour side of the House are as determined to protect them as anybody in the country.

The Prime Minister

I wholly share the right hon. Gentleman's view that we must protect the lives of our own Service men, whose great skill and courage we applaud and admire. With regard to that particular event, and all events other than the mere tactical ones in the South Atlantic, the task force clearly is and was under political control. I want to make it perfectly clear that after the announcement of the maritime exclusion zone—I referred to the matter in the House last week—there was another announcement on 23 April, which was communicated to the Argentine Government and also to the United Nations. It may help if I read it in full:

“In announcing the establishment of a maritime exclusion zone around the Falkland Islands, Her Majesty's Government made it clear that this measure was without prejudice to the right of the United Kingdom to take whatever additional measures may be needed in the exercise of its right of self-defence under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. In this connection, Her Majesty's Government now wishes to make clear that any approach on the part of Argentine warships, including submarines, naval auxiliaries, or military aircraft which could amount to a threat to interfere with the mission of the British forces in the South Atlantic will encounter the appropriate response” .

The warning was given to the Argentine Government, I repeat, on 23 April. It was reported to the United Nations on 24 April.

Mr. Foot

All of us can understand the documents that have been put in the Library on this matter, but the right hon. Lady has not fully explained why such a development as this occurred in the circumstances in which it did occur, nor has she explained why the maximum amount—or, at any rate, a considerable amount—of force was used to carry it out. None of these things has been explained. They will need to be explained much more fully to the country and to others. Does the right hon. Lady appreciate that these are important matters for our own Service men, whom we wish to protect as much as anyone? They are also important for the support that this Government may command throughout the world in these matters. If the [column 16]right hon. Lady and the Government do not appreciate that the sinking of the cruiser raises great questions of this kind, she does not understand the situation.

The Prime Minister

May I make it perfectly clear that the worry that I live with hourly is that attacking Argentine forces, either naval or air, may get through to ours and sink some of our ships. I am sure that that will also be in the right hon. Gentleman's mind. There was clear aggressive intent on the part of the Argentine fleet and Government. It could be seen first in their claims. They previously claimed that they had sunk HMS “Exeter” , that they had damaged HMS “Hermes” , leaving it inoperative and badly damaged, and that they had brought down 11 Harriers. That was clear evidence of Argentine aggressive intent. The right hon. Gentleman may also remember the persistent attacks throughout the whole of Saturday on our task force, which were repelled only by the supreme skill and courage of our people. He may also know, or will hear from my right hon. Friend, of the very heavy armaments that the cruiser carried, and, of course, the cruiser was accompanied by two destroyers, which were not attacked in any way.

Mr. Mates

Does my right hon. Friend agree that, of all the uses to which the word has been put in the last weeks, the word “paramount” applies most of all now to the safety and lives of our Service men in the south Atlantic? Will she further agree that the House of Commons, having agreed to send the task force to back up our diplomacy, cannot now flinch from the consequences that may occur, however serious they are?

The Prime Minister

I wholly agree with my hon. Friend. Our first duty is to our own forces, who are there on our orders and with our support. We must look after their safety. Our second duty is to see that we try to use minimum force. However, that cruiser and the associated destroyers—and, of course, there are other task forces of the Argentine Navy also at large in the South Atlantic, not far from the exclusion zone—posed a very obvious threat to the men in our task force. Had we left it any later it would have been too late and I might have had to come to the House with the news that some of our ships had been sunk.

FALKLAND ISLANDS

Q2. Mr. Dalyell

asked the Prime Minister if she will make a statement on the Falkland Islands.

The Prime Minister

My right hon. Friends Francis Pym the Secretaries of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and John Nott for Defence will be making full statements after questions on recent diplomatic and military developments respectively.

Mr. Dalyell

When the Prime Minister referred to political control, did she herself, personally and explicitly, authorise the firing of the torpedoes at the "General Belgrano" ?

The Prime Minister

I assure the hon. Gentleman that the task force is and was under full political control.

Sir John Biggs-Davison

Would not some of the ignorant and irresponsible questions coming from the Opposition have been avoided if the Leader of the Opposition had done his duty to his party, to the country, and as a Privy Councillor, by availing himself of the [column 17]invitation from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to acquaint him with matters to which we, who are not sworn of the Privy Council, do not wish to have access because we have confidence in her handling of this affair and in Her Majesty's Forces?

The Prime Minister

It is for the right hon. Gentleman to say whether he will avail himself of any offer to talk on Privy Councillor terms.

Mr. William Hamilton

No.

The Prime Minister

It is for the right hon. Gentleman to decide whether he will avail himself of the invitation.

Mr. Hamilton

It is for us, too.

The Prime Minister

Apart from that, it may concern right hon. and hon. Gentleman on that side. He did not wish to do so. In the meantime, I beg him to have some regard for the practical considerations that affect our operations in the South Atlantic.

Mr. Foot

Would the right hon. Lady care to read to the House what she said about the matter of consultations on "Panorama" a few days ago? Will she also repeat to the House what I think she understood well before, namely, the attitude that has been taken by many Opposition leaders in previous times, who thought that they would be failing in their duty to the House of Commons if they were to gag themselves? If the leader of the Liberal Party wants to do it, he is perfectly entitled to do so. I should be very happy if the right hon. Lady would read to the House and country her own words on this subject.

The Prime Minister

I do not quarrel with the right hon. Gentleman's decision in any way. I made an offer available to him on the same basis as I did to the right hon. Gentleman the leader of the Liberal Party and to the leader of the SDP in this House. Whether he takes it up is a matter for him. I have been in a similar position. There have been times when I have taken the offer up and times when I have not.

Sir Anthony Kershaw

On the subject of the cruiser, how can anyone maintain that such a ship, armed in that way, and accompanied by those destroyers, was not a threat to our forces? Will my right hon. Friend also bear in mind that the first communiqué about the sinking from the Argentine side said that the ship was all right, except for damage to its steering? If that were true, does it not show that minimum force was then used?

[column 18]

The Prime Minister

I agree with my hon. Friend. The cruiser posed a real threat to our forces then, and would have continued to do so in the coming days.

Mr. Grimond

In view of these events in the South Atlantic, has not the time now come for a fresh, direct approach by Her Majesty's Government to the junta proposing that the Argentines evacuate the Falkland Islands, so that negotiations can then be entered into directly between us? After all, we are still not at war with the Argentine.

The Prime Minister

At the moment we prefer to make our approaches through a third party. Mr. Haig did valiant work, and it is clear that he is still interested in trying to bring about a solution, both through his own efforts and, as the right hon.

Gentleman may have read, through certain initiatives that are being undertaken by Mr. Haig through the Peruvian Government, and which we are pursuing vigorously. We have not gone through the junta itself. It is not easy to see with whom one would be negotiating, whether it would be the president, other members of the junta or the generals behind it. Throughout, that has been a very difficult problem.

ENGAGEMENTS

Q3. Mr. Brinton

asked the Prime Minister if she will list her official engagements for Tuesday 4 May.

The Prime Minister

I refer my hon. Friend to the reply that I gave some moments ago.

Mr. Brinton

Is my right hon. Friend aware that she still has massive support for her Government's policies on the Falkland Islands? Is she also aware that there are two former colonies in the world today with populations of fewer than 8,000 and about 20 countries which have less land area than the Falkland Islands? Will she ensure that Britain does not deviate from its determination to demonstrate that armed, unprovoked aggression must never pay?

The Prime Minister

I believe that what my hon. Friend says about there being small countries in the Commonwealth and countries with smaller areas than the Falkland Islands is correct. I entirely agree that unless Britain manages to stop and undo the Argentine aggression, many other small countries and territories will go in fear that they may suffer the same fate.