

CONFIDENTIAL

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

DIPLOMATIC REPORT No. 158/82

UNP 040/6

Prime Minister
paras 1 to 22 : narrative
paras 23 to 29 : comment.
A.F.C. ¹⁶/₇

General Distribution

UNITED NATIONS

2 July, 1982

THE FALKLANDS CRISIS AT THE UNITED NATIONS

*United Kingdom Permanent Representative to the United Nations at New York
to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs*

SUMMARY

The Falklands crisis was unique at the UN. It generated unprecedented public interest (paragraphs 1-3).

2. It broke unexpectedly on 1 April. The Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council appealed for restraint but the Argentines invaded on 2 April. SCR 502 was adopted the same day (paragraphs 4-7).

3. Thereafter we had to go on the defensive at the UN, in order to resist attempts to tie our hands militarily while negotiations were pursued. There was much activity at the UN during Secretary Haig's negotiations. Several attempts to resume proceedings in the Security Council were fended off (paragraphs 8-11).

4. After the failure of Secretary Haig's efforts, the Secretary-General on 2 May proposed ideas for a negotiated settlement. There followed nearly three weeks of intensive negotiations in New York before the Secretary-General admitted failure on 20 May (paragraphs 12-15).

5. On 21 May British forces landed in the Falklands and the Security Council met. The Irish tabled an unhelpful draft resolution; this was amended by the Non-Aligned and adopted on 26 May as SCR 505. It mandated the Secretary-General to negotiate a ceasefire. He failed; the Security Council met again, Spain and Panama tabled a draft resolution which we had to veto on 4 June. Attention then moved to the military action on the Islands (paragraphs 16-22).

6. There will be further activity at the UN but we should resist Security Council involvement, even though the UN was of help to us following the Argentine invasion. The proceedings at the UN demonstrated the differences between governments' behaviour in capitals and in the public forum of the UN. They also demonstrated Argentina's total dedication to its claim and its untrustworthiness. Argentine diplomacy was as unsuccessful as their military effort. The UK nevertheless had to resist the instinctive pacifism of the UN membership. Overall Britain's reputation at the UN was greatly enhanced (paragraphs 23-28).

7. A tribute to Ministers, to the Falklands team at the UK Mission and to support staff there and elsewhere (paragraph 29).

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Sir,

New York,

2 July, 1982.

As a final act before leaving New York, I have the honour to submit some comments on the evolution of the Falklands crisis at the UN. As a rule I shun the practice of addressing despatches to the Department on specific crises at the UN. Such episodes are normally fast moving and ephemeral, and the telegrams speak for themselves. However, the Falklands affair at the UN was so unexpected to the whole membership, so unique in its nature, so tempestuous in its development and so widely publicised throughout the world that it deserves special treatment.

2. The sustained public attention which it generated was, in the unanimous opinion of the most long-serving UN officials and delegates, unprecedented in the history of the Organisation. Particularly when the negotiations moved to the UN, television, radio teams and journalists, not just from Britain, the US and Argentina, but from all over the world, swarmed to New York. For weeks, every time the Secretary-General, myself, or the Argentine negotiators entered or left the building we were besieged by swarms of cameras and microphones. I and my senior staff must have given literally hundreds of press, TV and radio interviews. None of us had ever known anything like it. It reached the stage where I was being button-holed by total strangers in the streets of New York and was being told by visitors from Africa, Eastern Europe and from as far away as East Asia, that I was appearing on their television screens more frequently than their own political leaders!

3. It is not easy to explain this astonishing surge of public interest. Perhaps it was the very improbability of a war between Argentina and Britain, the remoteness and romantic overtones of the cause for which we were fighting, the unexpectedness of the whole crisis, the spectacle of an ex-imperial power which had willingly given up a vast empire suddenly girding itself to defend a tiny community 8,000 miles from its shores; perhaps the very novelty of the involvement in conflict of a country from a sub-continent which has been blessedly almost free of the wars and tensions which have beset Europe, Africa and Asia over the past two or three generations.

4. Certainly the crisis hit the Security Council like a bolt from the blue. During the first three months of the year, the Council had, as usual, been heavily bogged down with the Middle East—the Lebanon and the West Bank—and latterly with a novel Nicaraguan complaint about US aggression and interference in Central America. The Anglo/Argentine talks which had taken place in New York in February had passed unnoticed by the UN membership, and I doubt if many of my colleagues were aware of the row which had blown up between Argentina and ourselves in late March over the scrap merchants on South Georgia.

5. On 31 March, I heard that the new Argentine Permanent Representative, Eduardo Roca, was thinking of bringing the question of South Georgia to the attention of the Security Council but that Mrs. Kirkpatrick of the US (then President of the Council) was disposed to bring him and me together to discuss the matter without having recourse to the Council. Meanwhile, I had been warned by the Department that an Argentine invasion of the Falklands might be imminent: the meeting between myself and Ambassador Roca never took place.

6. On 1 April the storm broke here. On receiving confirmation from the Department that the Argentines were going to invade, I first arranged that the Secretary-General should summon Ambassador Roca and myself separately to

appeal to both of us to exercise restraint. He did so and published his appeal at midday, followed by a second appeal in the afternoon as he was leaving New York on a trip to Europe. By that time I had formally called the Council to take action to deter the threat of an Argentine invasion. My Argentine colleague was taken aback by this move, and Mrs. Kirkpatrick (no longer President) made an astonishing but unsuccessful attempt to block the Council from meeting. I dealt firmly with her and with the reluctance of certain other members, notably the Soviet Union, to be rushed into immediate action. That evening a Presidential appeal to both parties to exercise restraint was read out in open Council (Annex A).⁽¹⁾ I responded positively and challenged my Argentine colleague to do the same. He remained silent.

7. We went to bed in the near certainty that we would wake up to find that Argentina had invaded the Falklands. And they did followed by South Georgia the next day. On 2 April, I called the Council again, set out the salient facts and read out the text of a hurriedly drafted resolution which I was tabling and which eventually became SCR 502. The following day the Argentine Foreign Minister arrived in New York and a fierce and complex debate followed. Panama, acting for Argentina, did everything in its power to derail our operation—by floating an alternative resolution, by calling for a suspension of the proceedings (in order to lobby the Non-Aligned), by attempting to rob me of my vote as a party to the dispute. Meanwhile, we were indulging in intensive lobbying both here and in capitals, particularly with the Non-Aligned members of the Council. We played on their natural antipathy to the use of force to settle disputes and on Argentina's defiance of the Presidential appeal for restraint issued on 1 April. In the event, after hair-raising adventures, and last minute lobbying of King Hussein by the Prime Minister, we were delighted to see ten pencils raised in favour of our resolution with no veto from the Soviet Union. SCR 502 was born; it is at Annex B.⁽¹⁾

8. Immediately after the adoption of the resolution, we in the Mission realised that we would have to move to the defensive. By conducting a blitzkrieg on the Security Council we had succeeded in establishing a firm diplomatic base of support for our future actions—support in our own Parliament, amongst our partners in the European Community, in the US and amongst a wide spectrum of delegations throughout the UN. But we knew that we would not be able to carry out another coup of this kind, nor did it occur to us for a moment that Argentina would comply unconditionally with the resolution. When the Task Force set out from Britain, signs of nervousness immediately began to appear amongst Council members, even our friends and partners. Before the end of the first week in April the Secretary-General, the Irish, some Africans and others were talking in terms of getting a diplomatic negotiation under way in order to avoid further hostilities. This put us in a dilemma. We knew that to accept such proportions would tie our hands militarily and bog us down in a morass of endless negotiation. To refuse would risk having to veto in the Council a resolution which would appear eminently reasonable to most delegations, thus forfeiting international support. We had to buy time to enable the Task Force to assemble and reach the area of the Islands without losing diplomatic support in the process. As I was to learn from you privately in Washington on 22 April, the time I had to buy was no less than seven weeks.

9. Much activity followed. We took opportunities in other UN bodies to press our case against Argentina. We surprised the membership by making

⁽¹⁾ Not printed.

powerful speeches in the Committee on the Non Use of Force and ECOSOC (Celebration of the International Day of Peace), while the Argentines concentrated on mobilising support in the Non-Aligned Movement for their claim to sovereignty over the Falklands and whipping up Latin American solidarity in the Organisation of American States.

10. I kept in close touch with the Secretary-General and with the (Zairean) President of the Security Council. I held regular briefings with the Ten and with the Old Commonwealth. Relying on the support which we had secured for SCR 502 I made our position crystal clear, namely that we would obviously prefer the peaceful implementation of the resolution, but we would not in the meantime allow anything to inhibit us from exercising our inherent right of self-defence under Article 51 of the Charter.

11. Throughout April nerves became increasingly frayed in the Security Council as the media reported the steady advance of the Task Force and we regularly reported to the Security Council (as is required) the steps we were taking under Article 51. Pressure from Panama (Argentina's surrogate) and the do-gooders such as Ireland and Japan rose and fell for a return to the Council and a call for military restraint combined with negotiations. However, the President of the Council and the Secretary-General held firm on the line that the Council should do nothing which might inhibit Secretary Haig's efforts to reach a negotiated settlement. Our repossession of South Georgia on 25 April raised the temperature, but the Argentines, who had achieved only moderate success with the Non-Aligned Movement and in the OAS, did not press for Council action. Pressure also grew for UN involvement in the House of Commons following Mr. Denis Healey's visit to New York and the real or simulated misunderstanding by the Labour Party of a very low key and routine appeal published by the Secretary-General on 26 April.

12. The pace quickened at the turn of the month with our announcement of a Total Exclusion Zone, Secretary Haig's announcement of the failure of his mission and the sinking of the *General Belgrano* on 2 May, followed two days later by the sinking of HMS *Sheffield*. The Secretary-General, whose "brains trust" had been working on contingency plans since 8 April, at last got into the act on 3 May in parallel with an abortive initiative taken by the President of Peru.

13. On 2 May, the Secretary-General gave you and the Argentines a "set of ideas" (Annex C)(¹) for a negotiated settlement including mutual withdrawal, the commencement of diplomatic negotiations, the lifting of sanctions and exclusion zones, and the negotiation of transitional arrangements pending the outcome of the diplomatic negotiations for a final settlement. He was immediately almost blown off course by a premature attempt by Ireland (tentatively supported by Japan) to return to the Security Council. This led to a difficult session of informal consultations of the Council in which I made brutally clear that we were not prepared to "exercise restraint" or freeze our military preparations in any circumstances other than immediate Argentine withdrawal. Fortunately it emerged that our support had not evaporated, and the disposition of the Council was to allow the Secretary-General to pursue his negotiations with the parties.

14. These negotiations continued at maximum intensity with maximum public attention until 19 May. The Secretary-General saw myself and my Argentine opposite number once or twice a day throughout the whole period, weekends included, working in an orderly way towards the elaboration of an interim agreement which would embrace the points in his original document, and which would

(¹) Not printed.

put the Islands under temporary UN Administration for a defined period during which negotiations for a final settlement would be carried out under his auspices.

15. The climax came after I flew back to London for consultations on the weekend of 15/16 May. I returned to New York with an eminently reasonable final position (Annex D)(¹) which I delivered to the Secretary-General that morning, making clear that we required a definitive response from Argentina within forty-eight hours. Perez de Cuellar was genuinely impressed by the flexibility we had shown and did his best to persuade the Argentines to accept. However, on 19 May their confused and ill-thought out response (Annex E)(¹) could only be interpreted as a comprehensive rejection of our proposals which were, quite rightly, taken off the table. Perez de Cuellar made a last minute effort through personal contact with the Prime Minister and General Galtieri and presentation of a final document of his own preparation (Annex F) (¹). We commented seriously on his document, although it was not acceptable to us. He never received a reply from Argentina. On 20 May he admitted failure to the Security Council at a meeting of informal consultations.

16. The following day British forces landed on the Falklands and the Security Council met in open session. We had achieved our tactical objectives. We had bought our seven weeks of time, we had negotiated in good faith, we had shown flexibility, Argentina had rejected our terms, we had maintained international support, and we were at last ready for the final phase of military operations.

17. The Security Council meeting was illuminating. We were faced with a torrent of Latin American rhetoric, although only Panama and Venezuela were intolerably hostile and abusive. Many of the Latin American delegates, although fully supporting Argentina, stated their positions in relatively restrained terms. Their effusions were offset by admirable statements from New Zealand, Australia and Canada, Belgium, Kenya and Guyana. Most of the rest of our friends and partners, including the Americans, would have done better from our point of view to have remained silent.

18. At the end of the debate the Irish tabled a resolution which they knew we would veto; an insufferable move from a fellow member of the Community. Even so, the Non-Aligned members of the Council showed that they had not abandoned us, and that they understood our reasons for being prepared to reject what appeared in UN terms to be "motherhood"—a call for a cease fire combined with fresh negotiations. It was the Africans, led by my Ugandan colleague, who amended the Irish draft to a point where we could accept it. On 26 May SCR 505 (Annex G)(¹) was adopted unanimously, giving the Secretary-General a mandate to seek a cessation of hostilities between the parties and the full implementation of SCR 502.

19. Perez de Cuellar lost no time in approaching both myself and my Argentine opposite number, although he realised the hopelessness of his task. I had made clear in my explanation of vote and in my statements in the debate that we were not prepared to become embroiled in another endless negotiation leaving Argentine forces entrenched on the Islands. We would only accept a cease fire if it was inextricably linked with Argentine withdrawal.

20. On 2 June Perez de Cuellar reported failure to the Security Council and the formal meetings resumed. My Spanish colleague took the lead with Panama

(¹) Not printed.

on behalf of Argentina and, after two days, pressed to the vote an apparently innocuous draft resolution (Annex H)⁽¹⁾ which, in our judgement, would have had precisely the effect which we refused to contemplate. The vote was deliberately timed to precede the close of the ministerial meeting of the Non-aligned Co-ordinating Bureau in Havana.

21. Even at this late stage our support had not disappeared. The Spaniard had the gravest difficulty in securing the necessary nine votes required to force a British veto. Had it not been for a last minute switch by Japan, who took Zaire with them, his draft would have gained only seven votes. As it was, he only got the required minimum of nine, and three of the Non-Aligned (Jordan, Guyana and Togo) abstained. It did not surprise me that France abstained, thus failing to stand shoulder to shoulder with us. By a happy chance, any odium which might have attached to our veto was diverted to the US by the bizarre performance of Mrs. Kirkpatrick who, having vetoed alongside us, announced only minutes later that, if the vote could be taken again she would, on instructions just received, abstain. Cuba duly streamrolled a condemnation of our veto through the NAM meeting.

22. This vote brought the drama in the UN to an end and public interest moved to the military action on the Islands. Perez de Cuellar, whose mandate under SCR 505 remained in being, made a last minute attempt with us and Argentina to avoid a final battle in Port Stanley, but without success. On 14 June, Argentine troops on the Falklands surrendered and on 24 June British troops re-possessed the South Sandwich Islands. By that time, the attention of the Security Council had turned to the tragedy of the Lebanon and, with the collapse of the Government in Argentina, action here degenerated to desultory exchanges of notes between ourselves and the Argentine and Panamanian Missions.

23. This is not the end of the story of the Falklands in the UN and I see problems ahead, particularly since the Latin Americans appear determined to press the issue of Argentine sovereignty in the General Assembly. There is also the risk that the Secretary-General, perhaps stimulated by other members of the Security Council, will at some stage report to the Council his inability to fulfil his existing mandate, thus leading to pressure from the Council on us to implement paragraph 3 of SCR 502 (the call upon the Government of Argentina and the UK to seek a diplomatic solution to their differences) in parallel with the formal implementation of paragraph 1 (cessation of hostilities). My strong advice is that we should resist Security Council involvement in this problem even at the risk of losing international support. If we allow ourselves to be lured into a UN negotiation we shall be on weak ground, for the majority here favour the Argentine case on the sovereignty question. Meanwhile, it is appropriate to draw a line under the dramatic chapter which I have described in the above paragraphs and to draw some conclusions from it.

24. First, there is no denying that the UN played an important part in our pursuit of our national interests following the Argentine invasion. I am sure that Argentina never expected our military reaction, nor did they anticipate the amount of diplomatic support which we were able to mobilise. SCR 502 was an important achievement, a launching pad for the military, economic and diplomatic pressure which we were able to exert. Without it, we would have found it hard to mobilise our friends and allies to take economic measures against Argentina. Without it, we might have had greater difficulties in the House of Commons, although this

⁽¹⁾ Not printed.

is not for me to say. Without it, we would not have been able to retain widespread international support here, even when we were conducting military operations against a member of the Non-Aligned movement. Our success over SCR 502 also demonstrates that we are not always on the defensive at the UN. If our cause is right, if our policies are clear and firm, and if our timing is right and our diplomacy vigorous, we can still command a wide measure of support here even amongst Non-Aligned countries.

25. Secondly, the course of events at the UN high-lighted the difference between the performance of governments in capitals and their behaviour in this universal forum of public diplomacy where they have to expose their attitudes to the world at large. This was true on both sides of the coin. The Latin Americans rallied strongly and, in some instances, with ferocious rhetoric, in support of Argentina in the Security Council and elsewhere. But my impression is that our bilateral relations with virtually all Latin American states were not seriously affected by this turbulence. With two exceptions, our European partners stood by us strongly in capitals, first by imposing and then by maintaining economic sanctions on Argentina. In contrast, with the exception of Belgium, their public statements here were weak and flabby, attempting on the one hand to placate the Latin Americans and on the other to support us but without endorsing our military action to recover the islands. The same was true of the US where the difference was very marked between the strong support we received in Washington and the vacillating alternations between passivity and active unhelpfulness here. In a crisis, you find out who your true friends are. In this place, the most trenchant and unqualified support for Britain came from the three old Commonwealth countries, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, from the Caribbean, notably Guyana, and from one or two African Commonwealth states, most particularly Kenya. By an unfortunate (but not fatal turn of fate) the Council's members included Ireland and Spain as well as China (with all of whom the UK has territorial issues), not to mention Panama, which had the Canal Zone at the back of its mind.

26. Thirdly, we learned the lesson of Argentina's total dedication to their claim to sovereignty, and their equally persistent untrustworthiness, a lesson which we must bear in mind if and when we ever re-open negotiations with them. As I look back on events here from the beginning of April, it is blindingly clear that the Argentines, having embarked on their military adventure, had no intention whatsoever of seriously negotiating the peaceful implementation of SCR 502, even when we offered terms which would have put them in a far stronger position eventually to achieve their objectives than they had ever been in throughout the long years of bilateral negotiations about the Falklands. My conclusion is that their diplomatic objective was simply to play for time indefinitely and to continue to express willingness to negotiate in the hope that international opinion (led by the OAS) would gradually move against us; that the origins of the crisis would be forgotten; that we would be seen as the aggressor and they as the victims; that as they gradually pushed us on to the wrong foot in the eyes of world opinion we would not dare to pursue our military operations beyond, say, a temporary blockade; and that, after a time, we would abandon our attempts to repossess the islands and content ourselves with saving our face in a welter of interminable UN negotiations. It is a matter of history that their diplomacy was as unsuccessful as their military effort.

27. Had it not been for our firmness of purpose, these Argentine tactics could have succeeded. Almost from the beginning, we were exposed to the instinctive pacifism so prevalent in this organisation. Many Council members, including

countries basically friendly to us such as Japan soon lost sight of the origins of the crisis, became obsessed with the desire to avoid armed conflict in the South Atlantic, and would have been prepared to settle for any kind of negotiation regardless of the rights and wrongs. They would have done this even though they would have known in their hearts that such negotiations would have undoubtedly left the Argentines in permanent possession of the Islands and that SCR 502 would have had no more prospect of implementation than the numerous Security Council and General Assembly resolutions on the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Occupied Territories, Turkish forces from Cyprus or Soviet forces from Afghanistan. This inherent weakness and escapism in the UN membership is another reason to avoid using the UN unless we can be reasonably confident of a successful outcome.

28. Finally, there is no doubt that, so far, the reputation of Britain in the UN has been greatly enhanced by our handling of the Falklands crisis. Not only our allies and partners, but even the Soviet Union and the Eastern Europeans, have been impressed by the unswerving resolution with which we pursued our policies in all fields. And I believe that a number of Non-Aligned countries, particularly in the new Commonwealth, felt reassured to know that Britain is still both capable and willing to act firmly when important national interests and internationally accepted principles are at stake.

29. I cannot conclude without paying a warm tribute to you, Sir, and to the Prime Minister and all others concerned for the unfailing support which we received here for our exertions; also to my own Falklands team in the Mission and to the Communications, Registry and secretarial staffs here and elsewhere who worked unflaggingly and without ever being overwhelmed by what must have been an unprecedented avalanche of urgent correspondence.

30. Since I write this despatch mainly for historical purposes, I accordingly enclose a chronology of events (Annex I)⁽¹⁾ as well as the principal documents to which I have referred in the text.

31. I am sending a copy of this despatch (without enclosures) to Her Majesty's Representative in Washington.

I am Sir

Yours faithfully

A. D. PARSONS.

(1) Not printed.