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MOST CONFIDENTIAL RECORD
TO
CC(82) 19th CONCLUSIONS
Thursday 22 April 1982

FALKLAND
ISLANDS

Previous
Reference:
CC(82) 18th
Conclusions

The Cabinet reviewed the state of the dispute over the Falkland Islands.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE informed the Cabinet of the British forces deployed in connection with the crisis and gave an account of the present location of Argentine naval forces. No Argentine warships had so far entered the Maritime Exclusion Zone (MEZ) declared by the United Kingdom around the Falkland Islands. A number of military options would be open to the Government if efforts to reach a peaceful solution failed. It would be possible, when the carrier borne Harrier aircraft reached the area, to declare an Air Exclusion Zone, in addition to the MEZ. To make a blockade of the Islands effective, it would be necessary to render the airfield at Port Stanley unusable. The Argentine garrison was thought to have sufficient stocks for about 60 days, but the morale of the young conscripts who comprised about 80 per cent of it would be affected sooner. Given air superiority, British forces could successfully recover the Islands, though the operation would be difficult and require more consideration before any decision was taken. The option to recover the Islands militarily would not always be available since the difficulty of the operation would increase if it were delayed. Ships and troops had limited endurance in the hard conditions of the South Atlantic winter.

In discussion the following points were made:-

- a. Care should be taken to avoid action of which the Americans might disapprove. But the United States Secretary of State, Mr Haig, regarded the application of military pressure as helpful in bringing the Argentine Junta to make concessions. As a result of Press speculation, it was widely believed that British forces would soon retake South Georgia. Unless this were done, it would not be believed that the Government was in earnest. The Islands might be valuable as a sheltered anchorage for British ships



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b. There remained a danger that military action such as the operation to retake South Georgia, as opposed to military pressure, might both reduce Mr Haig's influence in Buenos Aires and take some of the international pressure off the Argentine Government. The effect of the South Georgia operation on Mr Haig's position would depend on whether many lives were lost. Further action of a military nature, which might prevent a negotiated settlement, should not be taken over the next few days, while the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary was in Washington.

c. It was important to counter the Argentine claim, which was manifestly untrue, that in taking their military action against the Falkland Islands they had sought to avoid casualties. It was unfortunate that British television reports were giving the impression that the morale of the Argentine garrison was high.

d. Reports of Mr Haig's discussions in Buenos Aires had shown the difficulty of dealing with the Argentine Government; major decisions involved some 50 people and could be vetoed by Corps Commanders. President Galtieri was an alcoholic and apparently incapable of rational thought; his future as head of the government seemed doubtful. The Foreign Minister, Mr Costa Mendez, was without influence. But it was essential that any failure to secure a negotiated settlement occurred in a way that left the United States firmly in support of the United Kingdom's position.

f. Once the amphibious force had sailed from Ascension Island, it would be difficult politically to turn it back. A decision to instruct the force to sail should only be taken after careful consideration of the full implications, including the possibility of its use to make an assault landing on the Islands. If military action became necessary, it would be important to move quickly if the present level of all-Party support was to be maintained.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that a number of difficult decisions would be required, often at short notice, during the forthcoming weeks. The Defence and Oversea Policy Sub-Committee on the South Atlantic and the Falkland Islands, under her Chairmanship, would remain in day-to-day charge; but if possible the Cabinet would be consulted before a decision was taken to mount an assault on the Falkland Islands themselves. Meanwhile it was of the highest importance to maintain complete secrecy about possible operational plans.

The Cabinet -

Took note.

Cabinet Office

7 June 1982