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THE PRIME MINISTER

8 January, 1982

*Your Holiness,*

Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II has commanded me to thank Your Holiness for your message of 12 December, which she received following my meeting with the Apostolic Delegate and the President of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on 18 December. As I explained to Professor Chagas, it is constitutional practice in the United Kingdom that all matters with political implications should be handled by Her Majesty's Government and I am therefore replying on Her Majesty's behalf.

I was most grateful for your thoughtful statement on nuclear weapons and your admirable initiative in addressing Heads of State and Government on the problem of preventing their use. I fully share your concern about the horrific consequences of nuclear war. This has been the subject of authoritative studies by the United Nations Secretary-General and by an international conference of physicians. The British Government's own comprehensive report on the subject reached similar conclusions to those of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. In the United Kingdom there is full and open debate about nuclear weapons, the dangers they pose, and the pressing need to negotiate reductions in nuclear arsenals.

The prevention of all war, nuclear or conventional, remains an overriding priority of British Government

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policy. We have frequently stated our view that there would be no winners in any nuclear exchange. The purpose of possessing nuclear weapons is precisely to prevent their use. Despite the widely-felt public concern to which you refer in your message, we do not believe that nuclear war is imminent or inevitable. The strategy of deterrence has remained effective in spite of increasing international tensions. It would be impossible for one side to launch a nuclear attack on the other without the risk of massive retaliation. Arrangements for the prevention of accidental nuclear war are now much more effective.

It is in the interests of world peace that neither side develops a first-strike capability. Nor must a potential aggressor be allowed to acquire great strength with which to threaten those who wish to defend freedom. World peace and security depends on maintaining a military balance between East and West. I share your view that unilateral acts of disarmament which disturbed the balance of deterrence would be potentially dangerous.

I wholeheartedly agree that the way to reduce the present appallingly high level of nuclear armaments is by negotiation between the United States and the Soviet Union. The British Government fully support the objective of the 'zero level outcome' in the current US/Soviet negotiations on the reduction of intermediate-range nuclear forces which threaten Europe. We should be very glad to see the dismantling of the present Soviet missiles in return for the non-deployment of American missiles in Western Europe. Agreement on this category of weapons could open the way for reductions in other intermediate-range nuclear systems of the United States and the Soviet Union.

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We have also welcomed President Reagan's proposal for Strategic Arms Reduction Talks - START - to begin as soon as possible, with the emphasis on substantial reductions in the strategic arsenals on both sides. We very much hope that President Brezhnev will respond in the same spirit and grasp the opportunities which have been offered to end the nuclear arms race.

The British Government remain committed to the pursuit of balanced and verifiable measures of nuclear arms control and disarmament, leading to the eventual elimination of all nuclear weapons and the removal of the spectre of nuclear war for ever. At the same time, we are seriously concerned about the growth of conventional forces and weapons in the world, their use to suppress human freedoms, and the millions of casualties and vast amount of suffering caused in numerous wars fought with conventional arms. In our view, this is an immediate problem which needs to be tackled through the United Nations. We have therefore supported a resolution at the General Assembly calling for a UN study of the question to be launched without further delay.

I hope that the initiative taken by Your Holiness will lead to a greater awareness of these problems and an increased concern to find solutions.

*Yours sincerely*

*Raymond Thatcher*

His Holiness Pope John Paul II

SAW