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SOUTH ATLANTIC PRESENTATION UNIT (SAPU)

The attached paper issued at 1700 hours on 5 May 1982 contains a suggested line to take on the sinking of the General Belgrano and international reaction to it.

Cabinet Office

5 May 1982

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Sinking of the General Belgrano

Much has been made in some quarters of the fact that the General Belgrano was sunk just outside the Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ). The TEZ is quite irrelevant in this case. As Mr Nott made clear in the Commons yesterday, the cruiser was attacked because the heavily armed group of warships of which it was part was closing on elements of our Task Force and represented a serious threat to our own ships. It was therefore attacked under the terms of our warning conveyed to the Argentines on 23 April 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 British Forces in the South Atlantic will encounter the appropriate response."

In his statement yesterday Mr Nott said that "the threat to the Task Force was such that the Task Force commander could ignore it at his peril." The hostile intent of the Argentine forces has been repeatedly demonstrated by their attacks on our ships over the last few days and the potency of their weapons has now been tragically demonstrated by the loss of the Sheffield. It should be noted that it is believed that the destroyers accompanying the General Belgrano carried Exocet missiles similar to the one which hit the Sheffield. By attacking the capital ship, the Belgrano, our submarine destroyed the command and control of the Argentine force and removed the threat posed by the entire group of warships. There was therefore no need to attack the remaining Argentine ships and the submarine withdrew so that they would have been able to go to the assistance of the damaged cruiser.

International Reaction

It is not at all surprising that some of our friends and allies have expressed concern at the loss of life. So have HMG (Mr Pym expressed "deep regret at Argentine casualties" in the House yesterday). There is no doubt that there remains very widespread support (from the EC, the Commonwealth and many other countries) for our objective of obtaining by political, economic and military pressures, the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 502, that is to say an Argentine withdrawal and thereafter a negotiated settlement. The intransigence is in Buenos Aires not in London.