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PRIME MINISTER

New Hebrides: Mr. Blaker's statement

Peter Blaker had another difficult time in the House today. There was much derision from the Opposition when he attempted not to go into any details about what you and President Giscard said to each other in Venice about the New Hebrides. He was asked by Mrs. Dunwoody what Giscard had said to you, and rather foolishly said that it would not be proper for him to say what had been said to you.

Bernard Braine asked what lawful authority the British troops would have to use force in their present situation, which he described as "ludicrous". Mr. Blaker said that he agreed that it would be desirable to avoid the use of force, but that opinion in the Pacific was very grateful to Britain for sending the Marines.

He said several times that he hoped that France and Britain, in the persons of M. Dijoud and himself, could very soon re-establish a common policy line.

Eric Ogden said that Mr. Blaker had been too honest, too correct and too trusting with the French. Mr. Blaker said that he thought Mr. Ogden's remarks might possibly be double-edged. Mr. Ogden said that of course they were. Mr. Blaker said that it did not help to impugn the motives of the French Government. Once again, he said that his purpose was to restore a joint Anglo/French policy.

Mr. Kilfedder asked whether British troops would be used if the French did not acquiesce, and whether they would be withdrawn on independence. Mr. Blaker said that the first question was hypothetical (which aroused more laughter from the Opposition) and that it would be normal to withdraw troops at independence. He had also said that 30 July was still the target date for independence, but that it would clearly not be responsible to allow independence to take place while there was an insurrection in the islands.

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THE NEW HEBRIDES

With your Lordships' permission I shall make a statement on the New Hebrides.

On 11 June, following the death of a prominent opposition Deputy on the island of Tanna, the New Hebrides Government asked the two Resident Commissioners to recommend to their governments the despatch of British and French forces to the New Hebrides. This request was made during the course of a Cabinet meeting, and both Resident Commissioners agreed to make such a recommendation to their respective governments.

The Chief Minister's understanding of their agreement was later confirmed in writing. It was in response to this joint recommendation that the French decided to send some gendarmes from New Caledonia.

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They informed us of this decision. It was also in response to the joint recommendation that we decided to send a contingent of the Royal Marines, in order that we might be in a position to act jointly, should the need arise, with the French gendarmes. We informed the French of this decision.

On 12 June the French Government withdrew their gendarmes from the New Hebrides.

On 15 June the French Resident Commissioner made a formal protest to the British Resident Commissioner about the despatch of the Royal Marines.

In deploying our troops in Vila, we are not only demonstrating our willingness to live up to our obligations, but we are satisfied that we are acting in accordance with the 1914 Protocol which governs the joint administration in the Condominium.

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My hon Friend the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs is seeking an early meeting with M Dijoud, the responsible French Minister in order that we may clarify our joint approach to the problems in the New Hebrides. Meanwhile it remains the intention of Her Majesty's Government to do all in our power to promote a peaceful solution to the problem, to support the democratically elected Government and to safeguard the integrity of the New Hebrides.