

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

*Vietnam*  
*see Mark Set*  
c.c. Mr. Cartledge

Vietnamese Refugees - the Roach Bank

Saturday 2 June

The Prime Minister spoke with the Home Secretary at ~~1830~~ 1830 on the telephone this evening to discuss the situation relating to the Roach Bank. Mr. Whitelaw said that the FCO had now heard from the Americans that it was most unlikely that the Taiwanese would reply to the message which we had sent them. Indeed, they were convinced - and the FCO went along with this - that the Taiwanese would not reply. He and the Foreign Secretary had reluctantly concluded that we should agree to take all those aboard the Roach Bank and fly them from Taiwan to the UK.

The Prime Minister said that she was appalled that the Taiwanese had failed to offer any reply. Her initial inclination was not to go ahead with moving the refugees until at least we had sent another message to Taiwan. She thought it would be unacceptable to British public opinion to take them on the basis of no response from the Taiwanese whatsoever - unless, that is, they failed to reply to a second message.

Mr. Whitelaw said that his main worry was that the Roach Bank would now steam to Hong Kong, and this would simply exacerbate the already bad situation there. His latest information was that we would not have to take all 900 from the Sibonga, and therefore taking the Roach Bank refugees would not pose as big a problem as might at first appear. Mr. Whitelaw went on to say that if we were to fly direct from Taiwan, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees <sup>(UNHCR)</sup> would pay the transportation costs. The Inter-Governmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM) would make the arrangements for transporting the refugees, and Save The Children Fund had made it clear that they were capable of receiving them in the UK and providing the necessary accommodation. As soon as a decision was taken, an airlift could be arranged very quickly.

/The Prime Minister



The Prime Minister asked how the airlift would be arranged. She thought it might not be altogether easy with many DC10s grounded around the world. Mr. Whitelaw replied that his information was that ICEM were in a position to charter the necessary planes. He then repeated that to fly the refugees direct from Taiwan would avoid more trouble in Hong Kong, and this would be an important bonus.

The Prime Minister said that she was fearful of UK public opinion if we were to take the refugees from off a non-UK territory. It would be more acceptable if the refugees were to go to Hong Kong first and then be airlifted. It would be worth asking the UNHCR if they would still pay for the airlift if the Roach Bank refugees were taken from Hong Kong. The Prime Minister went on to say that she had a further worry - namely, that taking them from off Taiwan would create a bad legal precedent. It might be worth checking this point with Sir Michael Havers.

The Prime Minister then said that the British public would better understand a decision to take the Roach Bank refugees if we first got an official message from the Americans saying that they had heard nothing from the Taiwanese, and that it was unlikely that anything would come from them.

Mr. Whitelaw said that he understood the points which the Prime Minister had made. These were mainly for the Foreign Secretary to advise on, and he would speak to him urgently; and then telephone the Prime Minister back later in the evening. Subject to what the Foreign Secretary were to say, however, he still felt that it would be right to airlift the Roach Bank refugees from Taiwan.

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After this telephone conversation, I spoke to John Chilcot and then the Resident Clerk (FCO) and reported to them the main points which had arisen.

\* \* \* \* \*

/I then



I then spoke to Bill Beckett about the legal precedent point which the Prime Minister had raised. He in turn telephoned the Attorney, and then rang me back with the following advice.

The Taiwanese have no legal obligation to take in the Roach Bank refugees. Therefore, if we take them in, we are not creating any legal precedent. The Taiwanese possibly have a moral obligation, but that is all. If we take them, we possibly create some kind of practical precedent; but that is all that can be said. (I then pointed out that we had already last year taken in the refugees from the Wellpark, so the practical precedent was already there. Bill Beckett did not seem to be immediately aware of this; but he agreed that the practical precedent argument was even weaker.)

I passed this advice on to John Chilcot, the Resident Clerk (FCO) and George Walden; and advised them to tell the Home Secretary and Lord Carrington in case the Prime Minister raised the point again.

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The Prime Minister spoke to Lord Carrington on the telephone at <sup>19</sup> 1745.

Lord Carrington said that he had asked his officials whether any further approach to the Taiwanese was possible. Their advice was that, even if a further message were sent, the Taiwanese will not answer. This is because they feel totally isolated, and therefore see no reason to reply. It was just possible that Harry Lee might be able to help; our High Commissioner in Singapore was seeing him on Monday, but he did not seem very hopeful that much would come out of this.

Lord Carrington went on to say that his main concern was about the health of the children on the Roach Bank. He was worried about the health situation on board. The Prime Minister asked whether we were in touch with the captain. Lord Carrington replied that we were in touch with him, and it seemed that water and supplies generally were adequate.

/The Prime Minister



The Prime Minister said that she was most concerned about the reaction of British public opinion to our taking the refugees from Taiwanese waters. If we were to do so, it was essential that we get a firm message from the Americans to say that we had had no response from the Taiwanese - and there might be a case for first sending a second message. She then asked who was closest in touch with the Taiwanese, and Lord Carrington replied that this was probably Mr. Harry Lee. The Prime Minister said that it would be worth asking Harry Lee to get a message to the Taiwanese on our behalf.

Lord Carrington said that he was worried about British public opinion in a rather different way as compared with the Prime Minister. This week the Economist had been very critical of the Government handling of the refugee problem so far, and suggested that we should be more open-minded. The Prime Minister replied that the Economist was untypical, and that its editor was known to have a bias on these matters.

Returning to the question of how to contact the Taiwanese, Lord Carrington said that the captain of the ship was in contact with the port authorities. So if we were to inform Bankline that an airlift was being arranged from Taiwan, the captain would then pass this information on to the Taiwanese; and he was sure they would readily agree to the airlift being mounted from Taiwan.

Lord Carrington went on to say that perhaps the best course would be, having first ascertained that the children were all right, to leave off taking a final decision for another 24 hours. If an announcement were made then, after the Taiwanese had been given a little more time to respond, it would be possible to put over our position in a rather better light. We could say that we ~~could~~<sup>had</sup> use every avenue of approach but that we could not wait any longer because of the situation on board; and we would also take the opportunity of denouncing the Taiwanese for not agreeing to take the children off. The Prime Minister said that she generally agreed with this approach, except that it would be important not to appear as if we were a "soft touch".

/Lord Carrington



Lord Carrington concluded by saying that he would speak to his officials again about the possibilities of sending a further message to the Taiwanese. He would also contact Bankline and check the conditions of the children. He would then telephone the Prime Minister back either later tonight or tomorrow morning.

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Following this conversation, I telephoned John Chilcot and the Resident Clerk (FCO) again and told them the main points which had arisen. I also spoke to George Walden, but he had already heard from Lord Carrington.

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Sunday 3 June

The Prime Minister spoke with Lord Carrington again at 1105 this morning.

Lord Carrington reported that food and water supplies on the Roach Bank were adequate, and that he now felt there was less hurry to reach an immediate decision. The Americans still had had no reply from the Taiwanese to our message; however, the Taiwanese had asked how many ethnic Chinese were on board the ship. Unfortunately, the captain did not know - which was very annoying. But steps were now being taken to get him to find out - and if necessary, he might have to call a Taiwanese official aboard in order to ascertain just who were ethnic Chinese. As soon as the FCO had information on this point, they would telegraph the Americans who would in turn telegraph the Taiwanese.

The Prime Minister said that this seemed hopeful. If the Taiwanese were asking for this information, it might be that they would be willing to take in the ethnic Chinese. Lord Carrington agreed. He then went on to say that he did not think any further action was likely to be needed today. The Prime Minister concurred, but asked Lord Carrington to telephone her back if there were any new important developments.

/The Prime Minister



The Prime Minister then asked Lord Carrington if he had any idea how the Nicholas Henderson dispatch had been leaked to the Economist. Lord Carrington said that Andrew Knight had told him that he was in possession of four copies of the dispatch. It was very difficult to say how the leak had taken place, when so many people in Whitehall must have had access to it. He did not think in this case it mattered. The Prime Minister agreed, but said that she was worried about other leaks coming from the FCO - as she was also worried about leaks from DHSS. She would like to discuss the FCO aspect with Lord Carrington.

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I informed John Chilcot about this further conversation, and also the Resident Clerk (FCO). I also warned Andy Wood, who I have also been in touch with, that no announcement is likely today.

BP TPL  
4.6.79