

Belize

Ref. A07969

PRIME MINISTEROD: Belize: Withdrawal of the Garrison

BACKGROUND

OD decided in February 1981 that, if no settlement could be reached with Guatemala, the British garrison might be retained in Belize for up to a year after independence, provided that satisfactory control could be maintained over the foreign policy of the Belize Government during that period.

2. Belize became independent in September 1981. No settlement of Belize's dispute with Guatemala has been achieved. The Prime Minister of Belize, Mr Price, has written to you asking that the garrison should remain for at least three more years. Last week there was a military coup in Guatemala.

3. Mr Price has been told that the withdrawal date will be 21 June. If this date is to be met, a decision must be taken now, so that preparatory action can go ahead, and the withdrawal would become public knowledge by the middle of April. In his minute of 26 March the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary has proposed that we should not announce withdrawal at present, should retain the garrison for the time being and look at the situation again in about two months' time when the position in Guatemala might be clearer. He rests his case on

- (a) the domestic political difficulties which withdrawing the garrison would bring, in the light of criticism of the Government's policy towards Central America and indeed the Falklands; and
- (b) the strong American desire for us to keep the garrison in Belize which was shown by their attempting to link its retention with the terms of our purchase of Trident.



4. In his reply dated 26 March, the Secretary of State for Defence draws attention to

- (a) the risks of maintaining combat forces in an independent Central American country;
- (b) the point that, if we give in now to Mr Price, he will believe we can be pressurised into staying much longer;
- (c) the intelligence assessment that the military threat to Belize is low and
- (d) the fact that the Americans were reassured of our willingness to help by leaving behind loan service personnel to help the Belize Defence Force and to keep a naval presence in the Caribbean.

5. The Acting Chief of the Defence Staff, the Chief of the Air Staff, will with your agreement be in attendance.

HANDLING

6. You will wish to invite the Lord Privy Seal, in the absence of the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, to introduce the subject and then ask the Secretary of State for Defence for his views. Points to establish in subsequent discussion are:

- (a) Will it be possible to limit the postponement of withdrawal of the garrison, or are we likely, if we postpone, to undertake a commitment which will in practice prove open-ended? If the Committee's original decision not to leave the garrison there for longer than 12 months after independence is to stand, that will involve an announcement not later than July that the garrison is to be withdrawn in September.
- (b) What would be the purpose of retaining the garrison? The original object was to bridge the uneasy period during which an independent Commonwealth country could establish itself in the face of a claim to its territory



from one of its neighbours. Since the threat from Guatemala is now thought to be low, and there are no immediate prospects of a settlement with Guatemala, the purpose of retaining the garrison would presumably be primarily to give evidence, to the Americans and others, of British concern for the stability of Central America. Do the Committee feel that the United Kingdom should become involved in that region in support of American policies?

- (c) How would Premier Price be likely to respond to a postponement of withdrawal and how would it be presented to him? Belmopan Telegram No 121 of 25 March reports that the reaction of the Belize Government and public to the news of the coup in Guatemala has been calm. Would Mr Price think that, if the British Government's reaction is to postpone withdrawal, they might easily be persuaded to keep the garrison there for considerably longer? Does the Lord Privy Seal propose that Mr Price should be given any indication of when the new withdrawal date should be?
- (d) If the Committee feel that to announce a date for withdrawal now in the immediate aftermath of the elections in El Salvador would be difficult, could the Secretary of State for Defence accept a slight delay in the decision and the consequent preparatory moves, while still keeping open the option of withdrawal in June? Would it be possible to hold over an announcement until the end of April and still keep a June withdrawal date?
- (e) If the garrison is to stay in Belize for a further period, how is the cost to be financed? On whose vote? and from the Contingency Reserve?

CONCLUSION

7. If the Committee decides that withdrawal of the garrison should proceed as planned, by 21 June, it will be necessary to invite the Lord Privy Seal to consider how best to present this decision to the Americans and to the Government of Belize. You will also wish to register a decision on whether the announcement should be postponed until the end of April.



8. If the Committee concludes that the withdrawal of the garrison should be postponed, you will wish to consider whether a new target date for withdrawal should be set. You will also need to invite the Secretary of State for Defence to consider the consequences of this, in consultation with the Lord Privy Seal and the Chief Secretary, Treasury, and the Lord Privy Seal to consider when and how the news of the decision should be conveyed to the United States Government, the Government of Belize, and Parliament.

REA

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

31st March 1982