

# Briefing Note

No: 13  
7.4.82

## THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

---

Despite repeated assurances by the Argentine government that they were committed to a negotiated settlement, Argentine forces invaded and took control of the Falkland Islands on 2nd April 1982. During the debate in the House of Commons the following day, the Prime Minister declared:

"It is the Government's objective to see that the islands are freed from occupation and are returned to British administration at the earliest possible moment." (Hansard, 3rd April 1982, p.5)

The Government's Handling of the Crisis. While there were a number of references in recent months in the Argentine press to the possibility of an invasion, many were the work of just one journalist. Government statements reflected a harder line than that taken by the previous administration; but the British Government considered that overall evidence showed that the Argentinians remained committed, at least for the coming months, to finding a solution. The Argentinians also made repeated assurances to the United States as well as to Britain that they continued to give priority to a negotiated settlement on sovereignty. Bellicose statements have often been made by the Argentine press, and to some extent by the Argentine government, but in the end the crisis passed over. The British Government therefore concluded that there was no immediate threat to the Falkland Islands, especially as the latest round of talks between the two governments in New York at the end of February appeared to have established a basis for further negotiations. Even when scrap metal merchants landed on South Georgia on 19th March, there was no sudden heightening of tension, and first reports were that the Argentinians were willing to settle that problem by diplomatic means. Later sifting of information at Ministerial instigation confirmed that the decision to invade the Falkland Islands was not taken before 28th March, and possibly one or two days later, and that it might have been an unpremeditated seizing of the opportunity provided by the South Georgia incident. Certainly senior members of the American administration have told the British Government since the invasion that they were taken completely by surprise.

Criticism has been expressed of the Government's lack of military preparedness. As the Prime Minister said on 3rd April: "First, even if ships had been instructed to sail the day that the Argentines landed on South Georgia to clear the whaling station, the ships could not possibly have got to Port Stanley before the invasion. Secondly, there have been several occasions in the past when an invasion has been threatened. The only way of being certain to prevent an invasion would have been to keep a very large fleet close to the Falkland Islands, when we are some 8,000 miles away from base. No government has ever been able to do that, and the cost would be enormous." (Hansard, p.8)

Argentina's Motives. As Mr. Francis Pym, the new Foreign Secretary, stated in the House of Commons on 7th April: "Why did Argentina's ruler suddenly decide in the last days of March to resort to arbitrary and brutal aggression? I suggest that part of the answer lies in the very brutality and unpopularity of the Argentine regime itself..... Only a few days before the invasion of the Falkland Islands there had been riots in Buenos Aires and many people had been arrested. Harassed by political unrest at home, and beset by mounting economic difficulties, the regime turned desperately to a cynical attempt to arouse jingoism among its people. The Falkland Islanders have thus become the victims of the unprincipled opportunism of a morally bankrupt regime."

Government Action since the Invasion. Since the 2nd April, the Government has:

- \* obtained the passage of a Security Council resolution condemning the invasion, and calling for an immediate withdrawal of all Argentine forces and a diplomatic solution.
- \* broken off diplomatic relations with Argentina.
- \* frozen Argentine assets in this country.
- \* stopped export credits and banned the exports of arms to Argentina.
- \* imposed an embargo on the import of all goods from Argentina.
- \* urged a large number of friendly countries to take measures of their own.
- \* has despatched a large naval task force towards the South Atlantic, the most powerful force Britain has ever put to sea in peacetime and fully adequate for any action that may be required in exercise of our undoubted right of self-defence under the U.N. Charter.

Britain's Naval Strength. Any suggestion that our capacity to respond to the crisis has been weakened by a run-down in the strength of the Navy is nonsense. Equally, it is quite untrue that the Trident decision would inhibit Britain from mounting a similar naval task force in the years to come. The fact that the fleet has been able to put to sea, prepared for action in 4 days, reflects great credit on the Royal Navy.

There will be more ships and submarines operational in 1985 than there are today. It is the Government's intention to keep two aircraft carriers into the 1990s. 'Illustrious' will join the fleet later this year and will replace 'Invincible', when it is sold to Australia next year. 'Ark Royal' will replace the old carrier 'Hermes' in 1985. A massive modernization programme for the fleet is in hand. The principal threat to our peace and freedom will continue to come from the Soviet Union and we are increasing the numbers of our nuclear submarines - the main threat to the Soviet fleet - from 12 to 17.

This financial year we will be spending £½ billion more in real terms on the Navy than in the year before we came into office. Trident has had a minimal effect on the Defence budget so far, and it will only be taking an average of 3% of the budget over the next 18 years. In the future, we will still be spending more on the conventional Navy, even when expenditure on Trident is at its peak.

The Government's Objective. In the days ahead, the government will seek a diplomatic solution that will ensure a withdrawal of Argentine forces from the Falkland Islands. But should this prove impossible, the choice is clear. As Mr. John Nott, Secretary of State for Defence said:

"We are going to restore British administration to the Falkland Islands ..... we mean to stick to it even if we have to fight."  
("Weekend World" 4th April 1982)

And as Mr. Pym later said:

"We would much prefer a peaceful settlement. We will do all we can to get one. And we shall welcome and support all serious efforts to that end ..... But if our efforts fail, the Argentine regime will know what to expect: Britain does not appease dictators.....If the world does not oblige Argentina to restore their rights tomorrow it will be someone else's turn to suffer aggression and occupation. The world will become an even more dangerous place."  
(House of Commons, 7th April 1982)