

Briefing Note

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THE FALKLAND ISLANDS: AN END TO CONFLICT

As the Prime Minister declared in the House of Commons, the day after Argentine forces invaded and took control of the Falkland Islands:

"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)

Seventy-four days later, following the dispatch of a task force containing 100 ships and 20,000 servicemen some 8,000 miles across the world, and fierce and courageous fighting involving the loss of some 250 British servicemen and more than three times as many Argentinians, that objective was achieved. On 15th June, the Prime Minister was able to inform the House that the British Land Forces Commander, Major General Jeremy Moore, had reported that "the Falkland Islands are once more under the government desired by their inhabitants".

Origins of the Conflict

Britain never wanted a military confrontation with Argentina. Until the invasion, successive British governments had sought a peaceful agreement with Argentina on the future of the Falkland Islands. As late as February of this year, talks between the two countries appeared to have established a basis for further negotiations. Yet suddenly, the Argentine junta turned to arbitrary and brutal aggression. As Mr Francis Pym, the Foreign Secretary, stated:

"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."

(Hansard, 7th April 1982, col.959)

It was thus Argentina's totally unprovoked aggression that forced the Government, with the overwhelming support of the House of Commons, to send a formidable task force to the area.

Seeking a Peaceful Solution

From the very beginning, however, the Government looked for a peaceful solution. Within hours of the Argentine occupation, it obtained the passage through the U.N. Security Council of Resolution 502 condemning the invasion, and calling for an immediate withdrawal of all Argentine forces and a diplomatic solution. This was backed up by economic and other measures, in which we were supported by our friends in the European Community, Western Europe and the Commonwealth, and the tireless diplomatic efforts of the American Secretary of State, Mr Alexander Haig. As Mr Pym said on 7th April:

"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."

(Hansard, col.960)

The Government's strategy was firmly based on a combination of diplomatic, economic and military pressures. During the six-week journey of the task force to Port San Carlos, each were pursued. On the diplomatic front, following the failure of the Haig mission, the Government worked with the U.N. Secretary-General and others to secure the full implementation of Resolution 502. Together with economic measures, many nations joined with Britain in exerting pressure on the Argentine junta to withdraw, including the United States. Military action, first on South Georgia and later in applying the exclusion zone around the islands, was carefully pursued.

All of this was to no avail. Argentina was obdurate: it would not withdraw her troops unless the fruits of her naked aggression were accepted by Britain. This was something that the Government could not succumb to. There was no alternative. On 21st May, British troops landed on East Falkland.

Military Success

In the early hours of 15th June, beleaguered Argentine forces on the islands surrendered. As the Prime Minister said later in the day:

"The battle of the Falklands was a remarkable military operation, boldly planned, bravely executed, and brilliantly accomplished. We owe an enormous debt to the British forces and to the merchant marine."

Of those who could not be there at the hour of liberation, she said:

"The House will join me in expressing our deep sense of loss over those who have died, and our sorrow for their families.....They died that others may live in freedom and justice."

(Hansard, 15th June 1982, col.731)

So ended a war that Britain had never sought, had done everything possible to avoid, but at the end of the day, had seen through in order to defend the principles of self-determination and respect for international law. In this, we have given a clear example to the international community.

The Future

As Mrs Thatcher told the House of Commons:

"We must now bring life in the islands back to normal as quickly as possible.....After all that has been suffered it is too early to look much beyond the beginning of the return to normal life." (Ibid, col.730)

The first priority must be to secure a permanent and complete cease-fire, the removal of Argentine prisoners, and repair and reconstruction. "In due course, the Islanders will be able to consider and express their views about the future" (ibid), and thought will have to be given as to how best to uphold our commitment to the Islands' security and economic development. For the time-being, however, the nation can join in the honour accorded to our forces by the Prime Minister, as she said: "They have been supported by a people united in defence of our way of life and of our sovereign territory."