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MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
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RECORD OF A DISCUSSION BETWEEN THE
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE AND
AND THE GOVERNOR OF HONG KONG IN
THE MINISTRY OF DEFENCE ON 14th JUNE 1979
AT 4 pm

*P.O. M
18/6*

Present:

The Rt Hon Francis Pym MC MP
Secretary of State for Defence

Sir Murray Maclehose
Governor of Hong Kong

Mr M E Quinlan
DUS(P)

Dr David Wilson
Political Adviser

Mr R L L Facer
PS/Secretary of State

1. Sir Murray Maclehose said that the Hong Kong Garrison was now at full stretch. In the view of his military advisers, which was supported during a recent visit by Director of Military Operations, General Farndale, the reinforcements requested were the minimum necessary. To restrict illegal immigration it was necessary to guard the whole perimeter of the Colony. In the view of Commander British Forces the present level of activity could not be kept up beyond September without reinforcement. If reinforcements were not sent now, reinforcements on an altogether larger scale would be required in September.

2. The Secretary of State asked whether the problem was made worse by the influx of Vietnam refugees: did they create a climate which encouraged illegal immigration from China? Sir Murray Maclehose said that the two problems were separate. The cause of the high level of illegal immigration was the uncertain situation in China. The last big wave of immigration had occurred in 1962 after the Great Leap Forward. When the party line changed, Chinese officials were not anxious to take firm decisions and the people were uncertain about the future course of Government actions. In any case increased restrictions /were ...

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were out of line with the new policy of liberalisation. A similar influx from the countryside was happening in Peking and Shanghai. Representations had been made at various levels to the Chinese, who had said that it would take time to correct the situation. A further cause was the departure of the Chinese 42nd Army from Kwangtung Province to the Vietnam border: there seemed little prospect of this formation returning for some time. The peak of illegal immigration occurred in the summer when travel was easier, but he hoped that in the autumn the Chinese would begin to re-establish control, especially if they saw that the Hong Kong Government were taking vigorous steps to deal with it. It was therefore important to intercept as many immigrants as possible. This deterred people from trying. He hoped that the situation could be stabilised during the winter.

3. The Secretary of State did not doubt the seriousness of the problem in Hong Kong but the Government had inherited a situation in which the Forces were seriously undermanned. They intended to put it right, but time was needed. In recent years they had been increasingly concerned at the weakening of the will of NATO and the massive build-up in the Warsaw Pact. The new Government in Britain had taken a totally different view of this problem to that of the previous Government, and its actions and words had already had an effect on NATO. Therefore, he had to weigh most carefully the consequences of any assistance to Hong Kong on NATO. The overstretch in the British Forces arose from their commitments being greater than their resources; for example, the situation in Northern Ireland was in some respects worse than it had been in 1973/4. We were particularly short of helicopters and crews, and there was no way in which we could plug the gap in the short term. Our problems in NATO would be even more serious if it turned out that the Hong Kong problem was not a temporary one. He wondered, therefore, whether a more limited scale of reinforcement might be adequate. He accepted that it was not possible to continue to deploy all four Battalions of the Garrison unless reinforcements were provided: either reinforcements should be provided or the scale of deployment reduced. A possible source of reinforcement was the Gurkha Battalion in Brunei on a temporary basis. Then in six or nine months time it would be possible to add to the number of Gurkhas in Hong Kong by recruiting more, eventually leading to the formation of an additional Battalion.

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4. Sir Murray Maclehorse said that it was necessary to cover all routes by which illegal immigrants entered: if gaps were left, the work of the Garrison would be wasted. He understood that extra helicopters were necessary in order to reduce the numbers of men required. The Secretary of State asked whether Hong Kong could find extra helicopters from commercial sources. We were also in difficulties about finding additional Naval craft, because we were desperately short of sailors.

5. Sir Murray Maclehorse said that the Defence Costs Agreement of 1975 would not have been signed unless it had contained provision for reinforcements. Mr Rodgers and General Bramall had agreed that the reduced size of the Garrison was not militarily sound unless there was provision for reinforcements, and an essential element was the availability at short notice of the Battalion from Brunei. DUS(P) said that it had been understood that the Brunei Battalion could be used if there was a major internal security problem in Hong Kong. Sir Murray Maclehorse asked whether the Sultan had been approached. The Battalion in Brunei would be ideal reinforcement, since it knew the country in Hong Kong and was stronger in numbers than a British Battalion. On the question of an additional Gurkha Battalion, he thought it would be wasteful to increase the permanent Garrison to five major units. The size of the Garrison agreed in the Defence Costs Agreement was right; there had only been two occasions in the past when reinforcements had been necessary, in 1962 and 1967. Hong Kong might not need the additional Battalion when it had been raised in the spring of 1980. He stressed that if we did not give reinforcements to Hong Kong now, greater reinforcements would be needed later.

6. DUS(P) asked whether a smaller deployment of the Garrison would produce a dramatic drop in the rate of arrest. Sir Murray Maclehorse said that the present rate of capture was about one in two, or slightly better. A reduced deployment would result in a dramatic drop in the rate of arrest. He wished to stress also the effect it would have on Chinese action: this was why he had mobilised the Hong Kong Volunteer Battalion. Any reinforcement would help. He was confident of success; it would
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not be until June 1980 that he would know for certain, though it was possible that intelligence might show before then that the rate had dropped. He would be available on the afternoon of 25th June and the morning of 26th June for further discussions if required.

7. The Secretary of State said that he would consider how to help Hong Kong without affecting our NATO objectives. There would be a serious problem if the flood of immigrants did not abate next year and we had not made long-term arrangements to enable the Garrison to deal with it. He would pursue with the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary the possibility of drawing on the Brunei Battalion.

Secretary of State's Office

15th June 1979

DISTRIBUTION:

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PS/Prime Minister

J S Wall Esq
APS/Foreign & Commonwealth
Secretary

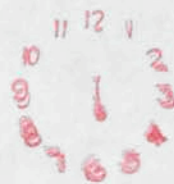
M J Vile Esq
PS/Secretary to the Cabinet

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18 JUN 1979





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THE COMPLIMENTS OF THE
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