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 Prime Minister
 No changes proposed.
 CDP
 28/6

PRIME MINISTERMERCHANT SHIPPING IN THE GULF AND THE ARMILLA PATROL

Although the level of Iraqi and Iranian attacks on merchant shipping in the Gulf has reduced in the last fortnight I thought it would be prudent to review the current position and the role of the Armilla patrol. I am not proposing any major change in our stance: we obviously need to continue to steer a careful course between reassuring our merchant shipping and increasing the risk of involvement in the conflict. But I thought that I should share my assessment of the situation with you and our OD colleagues.

The role of the Armilla patrol is to maintain a UK presence in the area and give British shipping reassurance that assistance is nearby if required. I do not see any reason to change that role at present. Although the level of UK shipping in the Gulf has fallen in the last year there is no sign that shipping is being driven out by risks. Whilst insurance rates have risen significantly this is not serving as a deterrent and both the Iranians and the Gulf states are taking steps to compensate shipowners. There is no sign at present of either the shipping industry or the Gulf States asking for any form of protection - indeed there are clear indications that such a step would be seen as an unwelcome escalation.

One area which clearly needs to be kept under review is the adequacy of the advice issued to UK registered shipping of the risks they run in entering the Gulf. I understand that the General Council of British Shipping is about to issue comprehensive and detailed guidance on the situation in the Gulf covering in particular the Iraqi MEZ, the Iranian advice zone, UK Government advice, traffic



zones, positions and methods of attacks on shipping and necessary preparatory and defensive measures. This will be distributed to all members of the GCBS. Unless the situation deteriorates significantly I do not believe there is more we can do to make these risks clear.

The ships of the Armilla patrol are currently at a maximum of 5 days notice for the Gulf although the great majority of the time is spent in the patrol area in the Gulf of Oman or at the entrance to the Gulf. (I recently decided to cancel a visit to Colombo, which although within 5 days sailing, I judged to be too far away given the military situation). The ships would, if possible, assist a British ship under attack or render humanitarian aid to any ship once an attack had ceased. But, under present rules, they may not enter the Gulf itself, except on a prearranged visit or in an emergency, without prior Ministerial authority. Even though most of the UK merchant shipping is in the lower part of the Gulf, this restriction means that the Armilla ships might take a considerable time to reach any ship which had been attacked (in excess of 24 hours in the worst case). Nevertheless I do not propose that we should allow the Armilla ships to patrol inside the Gulf. This would only increase the risk of involvement in the conflict; in the event of an attack we could still not guarantee to be in the right area; and there would almost certainly be other shipping available to render assistance if required.

The present plan is that the Armilla ships will remain in the patrol area until mid-July when they are planned to visit the Seychelles. I shall review that visit nearer the time. I would not at present propose to reduce the formal maximum of 5 days notice since the ships are, in practice, well within this notice period for the bulk of the time and a reduction in notice would severely limit the number of ports where essential maintenance can be carried out. We are already using the facilities available within 5 days to the maximum possible. So far as visits are concerned the ships normally enter the Gulf at least once during a patrol. There are difficulties



in arranging visits to the Gulf states, nearly all of which stem from the sensitivities of the states themselves. However, such visits are a useful low key way of showing our presence without undertaking regular patrols in the Gulf. The next Armilla ships are planned to visit Saudi Arabia and the UAE and I shall try to expand this programme if possible.

I am copying this note to the other members of OD, the Secretary of State for Transport and Sir Robert Armstrong.

Ministry of Defence
25th June 1984

CONQUEROR
21
LONDON