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*An all too typical letter. In spirit of the vast sums allocated to such dep't. there is never any money to do things that should be done - drop the idea.*

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE  
MAIN BUILDING WHITEHALL LONDON SW1

Telephone 01-~~936 7022~~ 218 2111/3

11th December 1980

*Mr Whitby*  
Prime Minister

(1)

Dear Michael,

*As foreseen. If we are to go ahead with the idea, it looks as tho' it would have to be funded from the contingency reserve or by "raiding" the aid programme. Would you like to have a small*  
ITALIAN EARTHQUAKE RELIEF *Amintinal meeting? And*

Paul Lever sent us a copy of his letter to you of 8th December about relief for the Italian earthquake. I ought to offer our comments on the suggestion that has been made that the Royal Engineers might provide assistance.

The Royal Engineers certainly could take on tasks such as preparing sites for prefabrication housing as has been suggested in Rome telegram 663 of 5th December, and there might well be other tasks that would be suitable. We would need to send out a small reconnaissance party to assess the nature of the work and to make recommendations as to the size and type of unit that might best be involved before we could say much more.

We are not volunteering for this task since the Royal Engineers already have a full programme of work and to make a worthwhile gesture would involve diverting a unit of Squadron size from other tasks. Nevertheless if the view was taken that it was right for Britain to offer military assistance then we could make a Squadron available.

You will expect me to mention costs. If the task was to be sponsored by an Exchequer Department, most conveniently the FCO, then under the normal rules we would recover only the extra costs involved. On this basis moving a Royal Engineers Squadron to Italy and keeping them there for three months, might cost of the order of £0.5M if they went by air and £0.25M if they went by road. This assumes that no special civil engineering plant beyond that available to a field Squadron would be needed and if there were a requirement for this sort the costs could well rise

M O'D B Alexander Esq





sharply. Given the possibility of an overspend this year against the defence cash limit, and the substantial reductions which are having to be made in Estimates next year I am afraid that it would not be possible for us to find the funds to cover an exercise of this sort.

I am copying this letter to Paul Lever (FCO) and John Wiggins (HM Treasury).

*Yours ever,*

*D B Omand*

(D B OMAND)

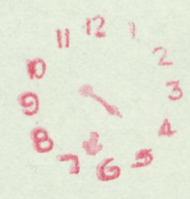




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11 DEC 1980



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cc: FCO  
JHT

BPC

Italy

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

15 December 1980

Italian Earthquake Relief

The Prime Minister has seen your letter to me of 11 December about the possibility that the Royal Engineers might provide assistance in the area affected by the Italian earthquake. She has expressed sharp regret that once again it is proving impossible for major departments to find the relatively small sums of money needed to carry out urgent tasks. However, she is reluctant to see another inter-departmental argument and has therefore said that the idea of sending the Royal Engineers to Italy should be dropped.

I am sending copies of this letter to Paul Lever (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and John Wiggins (HM Treasury).

M. O'D. B. ALEXANDER

David Omand, Esq.,  
Ministry of Defence

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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Prime Minister

① London SW1A 2AH

The Foreign Secretary seeks your  
consensus in the expenditure of £500,000 this financial year  
on the supply & erection of British manufactures prefabricated  
buildings to the Italian earthquake zone. (The money had  
been set aside for compensation to the Iranians for damage to  
their Embassy here.) Agree?

12 January 1981

Dear Michael,

Yes no  
Am 12/1

Italian Earthquake Relief

In your letter of 15 December you recorded the Prime Minister's decision that the proposal to send Royal Engineers to Italy be dropped because of difficulties over finding the necessary funds.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary has continued to believe that there was a strong political case (especially in the aftermath of the various significant developments in the Anglo-Italian relationship during 1980) for being seen to do rather more to help over earthquake relief. Towards the end of last year it became apparent that funds originally set aside as compensation to the Iranians for damage to their Embassy in London would not now be required for that purpose in the current financial year. Accordingly, we considered the possibility of making a sum available to support the Royal Engineers' proposal but, shortly before Christmas, a report was received from a Royal Engineers Officer who had visited the earthquake area, which recommended against this on a number of apparently good practical grounds; there was, in any case, no clear consensus between our Embassy and the local Italian authorities about the precise tasks which a Royal Engineers Squadron might undertake. We have therefore not pursued this.

Since then, further reports from HM Embassy Rome and HM Consul-General at Naples, and the efforts of other countries have made it clear that further longer term help from HMG to the victims of the earthquake could have a significant effect in alleviating hardship and would be welcome to the authorities. Moreover there are specific ways in which we could usefully help. In particular, the Italian Relief Coordinator, Signor Zamberletti, has confirmed to HM Ambassador Rome

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that prefabricated buildings of a kind which are available in Britain are badly needed. Subject to the essential premise that the funds are spent within the present financial year, which appears possible to arrange, Lord Carrington accordingly recommends that the Prime Minister should agree that up to £0.5 million be spent on the purchase and transport of British manufactured prefabricated buildings for use in the disaster area.

Lord Carrington envisages that in consultation with the Italian authorities, we should ensure that an appropriate number of the buildings go to the Solofra/Serino area where British aid has so far been concentrated; and proposes that we should keep in reserve the possibility, subject to Ministry of Defence views, of sending a small management team of, say, a dozen Royal Engineers to assist in the erection of the buildings (to be paid for within the same financial ceiling).

We shall need to consider urgently how to make a suitable public impact in Italy and in this country, and if the Prime Minister agrees to the proposal we may want to suggest that she writes to the Italian Prime Minister. But given the need to avoid anything which might seem to commit us to expenditure beyond the present financial year, we shall need to look at this in rather slower time. Meanwhile we shall have to get financial arrangements under way as soon as possible, and I should be grateful for an early reply.

*Yours ever,*

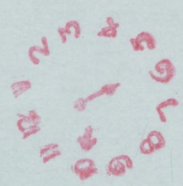
(F N Richards)  
Private Secretary

M O'D B Alexander Esq  
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13 January 1980

ITALIAN EARTHQUAKE RELIEF

The Prime Minister has seen your letter to me of 12 January. She agrees that a further £0.5 million may be spent on the purchase of transport of British manufactured prefabricated buildings for use in the disaster area in Southern Italy.

MA

F.N. Richards, Esq.,  
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

9/18