



Foreign and Commonwealth Office

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London SW1A 2AH

7 September 1990

Dear Charles,

MS

Eric Rennie
08/7/90

Iraq/Kuwait Emergency: Use of 0898 System

In her opening speech in the House of Commons debate on 6 September, Mr Ronnie Campbell MP asked the Prime Minister whether we could make available free of charge the recorded telephone advice which under the present arrangement members of the public must pay to hear.

At present, general advice is offered on an 0898 number, for which callers are charged over the normal rate. This recording includes the further numbers to call if callers wish to discuss individual cases. We were aware of possible criticism when we decided to introduce the 0898 system. We introduced this system because it was the only way to meet the very large demand for information which we expected. The alternative recorded message system which British Telecom could offer us - the Freephone system, which is free of charge to callers - would have been unable to cope with the anticipated volume of calls. The Freephone system also has the disadvantage that the message cannot be up-dated at short notice.

We have looked carefully at the idea of introducing a Freephone system now. It would still not meet our requirements. While the present volume of calls would be within its capacity, any dramatic development could cause overload and this would certainly lead to public dissatisfaction.

Although there was some initial criticism of our use of the 0898 system, we have since had few complaints. The signs are that the public have accepted that no profit will be retained by the FCO, and that the system was introduced because there was no other way of meeting public demand.

Since the beginning of the Emergency the FCO Emergency Unit has operated a 24-hour personal service (rather than recorded service) to answer individual calls from the public, and almost all families of people still held in Kuwait are in regular contact with this Unit at



no cost to themselves beyond British Telecom's standard telephone charges.

Since the beginning of the emergency the 0898 number has earned a total of £7,297 for the FCO. These receipts are payable to the consolidated fund but we are subsidising private helplines and charities to the extent of any "profits" made and AMT have agreed to increase our vote by a Supplementary Estimate to offset this. So far, we have agreed to pay £4,000 per quarter to Property Holdings of the Department of the Environment as rent for the offices of the Gulf Helpline Support Group; revenue from the 0898 number in excess of £4,000 per quarter will be given to charities in this country who are helping over the Gulf crisis.

Jans,
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