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cc PC

10 DOWNING STREET  
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*From the Private Secretary*

29 July 1988

**AFGHANISTAN: SOVIET PRISONERS OF WAR**

Thank you for your letter of 29 July suggesting how we should pursue the question of the treatment of Soviet prisoners in the hands of the Afghan Resistance Alliance. This matches closely what the Prime Minister has already said to Mr. Gailani and I am confident she will be content with the Foreign Secretary's proposals.

(C. D. POWELL)

Stephen Wall, Esq.,  
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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

29 July 1988

*Dear Charles,*

Afghanistan: Soviet Prisoners of War

Thank you for your letter of 11 July <sup>Mar</sup> recording the Soviet Ambassador's appeal from Mr Gorbachev to the Prime Minister to help secure the release of any Soviet prisoners held by the resistance.

The Foreign Secretary has considered this question carefully. There are obvious attractions for our dealings with the Soviet Union in showing willingness to help. This could also be of use to us if we wish to play an active part in promoting a settlement of the Afghanistan problem. Consequently the Foreign Secretary recommends that:

- (i) we should speak to the Resistance Alliance in Peshawar and, if opportunities offer, to resistance commanders in Afghanistan urging them to apply the 1949 Geneva Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War (in particular to treat prisoners humanely and to protect their persons and honour) and to cooperate with the ICRC as the relevant international body with long experience in dealing with such issues. We should stress the presentational benefit they would derive from this;
- (ii) we should tell the Russians that we are doing so. We should also urge them to press Najib to do likewise, and point out to them that the resistance can hardly be expected to give up their prisoners without some assurance of reciprocity from the Soviet/regime side.

The Foreign Secretary does not think we should become more deeply involved. There are a number of potential traps in the Soviet request:

- the war is not yet over. The resistance are engaged in a legitimate struggle and will want to hold on to their prisoners whilst hostilities continue. Any request that they should return the prisoners might at this stage be taken to imply that we were ready tacitly to acquiesce in Soviet attempts to foster the impression that the war ended at Geneva in April, and that the resistance are being unreasonable in continuing the fighting;

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- the fact that some Soviet prisoners are held by the resistance must be set against the thousands of resistance members held by the regime (8,000 in Pol-E-Charkhi jail near Kabul alone). There is a real risk that the regime may seek to use its prisoners as hostages (or even execute them) as resistance pressure on Kabul mounts. The resistance are not likely to give up their Soviet prisoners until they have some assurance of reciprocity. Nor would it be appropriate for us to mediate; the ICRC are already in the field;
- there is the question of repatriation of Soviet prisoners. The Russians naturally want to get their prisoners back to the Soviet Union, and want us to help them. But we must recognise that some Soviet prisoners may not want to return. The Foreign Secretary believes that we should be careful to avoid becoming associated with what might be perceived as forced repatriation of Soviet prisoners. He thinks it best to leave detailed negotiations to the ICRC, who have great experience and would wish to interview all prisoners individually to establish their wishes before decisions are taken about their return.

*Yours,*

*Stephen Wall*

(J S Wall)

Private Secretary

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SOVIET UNION: Contacts  
with Ambassador

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