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Prime Minister

Barrett

Prime Minister
Content with the approach set out by the Transport Secretary?
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THE THREAT TO BRITISH CIVIL AVIATION IN THE EVENT OF CONFLICT IN THE GULF

C. D. D. 20/11

1. The Ad Hoc Group on the Gulf has been looking in detail at the security of British airline operations if there is conflict in the Gulf. I have been reviewing the situation in the light of the Ad Hoc Group's preliminary views. There are a number of important decisions which will need to be taken and I would draw colleagues' attention, in particular, to the conclusions (paragraph 23) of this Minute.

The nature of the threat

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2. Saddam Hussein has said that Iraq will resort to terrorism as part of a war in the Gulf.

British aviation will be a major potential target, with British Airways as the prime target. The threat is considerably higher overseas than in the UK.

3. We are unlikely to receive intelligence about specific attacks. We must therefore try to ensure that there are in place by 15 January general levels of security which are adequate in terms of the threat to British civil aviation. To do so requires a major effort.

4. It is, however, impossible to provide absolute guarantees of security or even to take effective preventative measures against certain kinds of terrorist attack. There is probably no feasible way of stopping an attack using ground launched missiles on an aircraft taking off or landing; an attack on passengers waiting to check in; or one that is launched airside by terrorists coming in on an aircraft over whose security we have had no control. The best that might be done in such circumstances is to engage the terrorists whilst an attack is in

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5. There is a much better prospect of countering attempts to bring an aircraft down with a bomb or to hijack one. On the evidence of recent years the former is probably the greatest danger we face; but hijack attempts cannot be ruled out.

6. Our objective ought to be to ensure that all possible and practicable steps are taken in association with overseas governments and our airlines to prevent and deter terrorist attacks on British aircraft or at British airports.

Existing arrangements for aviation security

7. The Chicago Convention makes each state responsible for the security of international flights into and out of its territory. Thus the UK is responsible for the security of British and foreign airlines using its airports; whilst states overseas are responsible for the security of British airline operations in their territories. The exception is the USA which seeks to lay down and enforce security standards worldwide for US airline operations.

8. Security in the UK for international flights is tightest for high risk flights such as those by US airlines and El Al where all hold baggage is screened. On other flights between 5% and 10% of hold baggage is screened depending upon the assessed risk. In addition all passengers are questioned about their hold baggage to try to establish if they have been duped into carrying a bomb. All passengers and hand baggage are screened for weapons and explosives and one in three passengers and hand baggage are also hand searched. Access to airside areas is controlled at all UK airports by means of a pass system; at our main international

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airports this is computer based. With some exceptions, this is a higher standard of security than at international airports overseas.

Measures to improve security: domestically

9. My Department has drawn up a contingency plan to tighten security even further if there is a war. We have warned airlines and airports that tighter controls will be required, for example, over the reconciliation of passengers and hold baggage; screening of transfer, misrouted and rush baggage; acceptance of cargo; and transit passengers. But it will not be possible to do very much more than this. In the time available before the likely outbreak of war extra security staff cannot be recruited, vetted and trained to step up the level of searches and screening; nor is the space and the equipment which they would need available.

10. There is one step we might take. So far we have left it to airports to discuss with the police whether there is a need for an armed presence. Whilst the threat of terrorist operations at British airports is assessed as low, there may be value in a general armed presence at all our international airports, just as there presently is at our major airports. The Joint Intelligence Organisation believe knowledge of the presence of armed police has a deterrent effect.

Measures to improve security: internationally

11. The areas in which terrorists are thought likely to operate against British aircraft are the Middle and Far East, the Indian sub-continent, Europe and Africa. The security position in many of these countries has traditionally been less satisfactory than in the UK.

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12. Since the invasion of Kuwait my Department has worked with British airlines to establish the security picture at some 95 airports in the regions which concern us. We have identified a dozen security requirements we would wish to see at overseas airports to support British airline operations. These include procedures for passenger and cabin baggage screening; the screening and supervision of hold and rush baggage; and controls over aircraft access, catering supplies, transit passengers and cargo. Governments overseas were asked in August to ensure that these measures are in place for British Airways. Because of the threat of war, they have now been asked to put them in place for all British airlines.

13. We shall also try to work with the US Government who share our concerns about the terrorist threat, although they have fewer international services and have had higher security levels for several years because of the threat to their operations. We may meet US officials in January to compare contingency plans and explore the scope for co-operation.

14. Judged by requirements, whilst a number of countries have introduced new security measures for British airlines at our request, the picture overseas is still a patchy one, not least in Europe where there are some administrations with little effective security and no apparent will or capability to improve matters. I am contacting my opposite numbers overseas in some two dozen European and other countries to draw their attention to continuing deficiencies and to urge improvements. We are monitoring the position closely and inspectors from my Department will visit as many European airports as possible in the New Year to assess the latest position on the ground.

15. Where overseas governments will not take effective steps to improve security, we are in the process of asking British airlines to do so. British Airways have already introduced new

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measures, for example, in France and Italy. But we have to recognise the limitations under which they are working. They cannot avoid being dependent on foreign nationals and companies for searching and screening and on foreign airports to make space or facilities available. They may not always get co-operation. The USA have taken responsibility for their aircraft overseas for many years although this had led to friction with other states, including the UK, and arguably has discouraged some states from accepting their international obligations. One of the consequences was that the administration had to accept strong domestic condemnation for the "failure of security" which led to the Lockerbie disaster although none of the events were within US jurisdiction.

16. Imposing security obligations on our airlines where overseas governments do not prove up to the task is a significant step and means our accepting responsibilities which properly belong to states overseas. Whilst this shift in policy may be temporary, it could prove difficult to reverse once the crisis is over. Nevertheless if there were to be a terrorist attack we must recognise that it would be the British government which would be called to account. Neither Parliament nor the public are likely to accept that we should rely solely on foreign governments for the security of British aircraft.

17. The Ad Hoc Group has also considered whether some overseas flights might carry armed sky marshals. There are difficulties with the idea including possible resistance from flight crews and their unions. The Group has yet to take a final decision.

Decisions if war breaks out

18. With the extra security measures to which airlines and airports have been alerted, security at British airports will be as tight as we can realistically make it should there be a conflict. The only additional possibility, as I have

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suggested, would be to introduce an armed police presence at all our international airports and not just the major ones.

19. We can take no final decisions about the security of British airline operations overseas until a conflict breaks out. These will need to reflect the security position at the time at overseas airports and the nature of the threat. But we should be clear before a conflict whether particular security measures are acceptable in principle. We shall probably be faced with three broad areas for decision:

- (i) at those overseas airports which meet the minimum security requirements which we regard as necessary, we will still need to decide if those requirements remain sufficient in terms of the threat as assessed on the outbreak of war. We would expect them to be sufficient;
- (ii) where not all security requirements are met we will need to decide if the risk can be reduced to acceptable levels by taking other measures eg by stopping British airlines from carrying unscreened hold baggage or picking up cargo or by preventing passengers from ending their journey at transit stops; and
- (iii) where security requirements are not met and insufficient remedial measures can be taken to reduce the risk to acceptable levels, there may be no alternative to stopping flights by British airlines. The extensive spread of international operations, particularly by British Airways, and the patchy level of security overseas may mean there is no alternative but to stop a number of services. Although we have the power to do this, by directing the Civil Aviation Authority to suspend an airline's operating licence

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for a route, British Airways have said they would much prefer to suspend a service voluntarily rather than be seen to have their business directed by the Government.

20. It is, however, too early to be categoric about what will have to be done if war breaks out. Until it does, my Department and the FCO will continue to work with overseas governments and airlines to improve security as we have done since August. We should know by early January what action we may need to take in the event of a war.

21. However long a war may last, the threat of terrorist attack will not then come to an end. On the contrary, the threat may intensify motivated by revenge for an Iraqi defeat. In my view, we must plan for a terrorist threat that may last many months and perhaps longer.

A public warning about the risks of flying

22. Finally, if a conflict starts, it seems indisputable the public will have to be warned about the risks of flying. There has already been one warning of the enhanced risk. Whilst the terms of a warning cannot yet be drafted it is inevitable the public will have to be warned in starker terms than have ever been used before.

Conclusions

23. My officials will continue to work closely with those in other Departments, overseas governments and our airlines to ensure adequate security in the event of a conflict. In particular:

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- (i) contrary to our policy hitherto, we shall have to impose security requirements on British airlines where overseas governments fail to provide adequate security;
- (ii) despite the assessed low threat to British airports, there may be deterrent value in extending an armed police presence to all our international airports;
- (iii) no decision has yet been taken to introduce armed sky marshals onto some overseas flights;
- (iv) where security overseas is inadequate, we will seek to remedy the position by introducing other measures including stopping British airlines carrying unscreened hold baggage or picking up cargo or preventing passengers from ending their journeys at transit stops;
- (v) but where measures such as these prove inadequate we will have to consider stopping flights by British airlines where the risk is unacceptable. They are likely to do so voluntarily; and
- (vi) if there is a conflict, we shall have to issue a stern warning to the public about the risks to civil aviation.

Unless colleagues disagree, and subject to final decisions on questions such as sky marshals, I propose that we seek to prevent and deter terrorist attacks in the way I have outlined.

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24. I am copying this minute to colleagues in OPD(T), David Mellor and Sir Robin Butler.

MR.

MALCOLM RIFKIND

20 December 1990

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