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MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
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9K January 1991

Prime Minister
mod have now had further (+
some) thoughts about their
request.
JH

Dear Charles,

US REQUEST FOR DEPLOYMENT OF CARRIER GROUP

The Defence Secretary has now had an opportunity to consider colleagues' comments and questions on the US request for the deployment of an RN Carrier Group to the Red Sea to take over co-ordination of embargo enforcement operations there. In particular he has seen the note of the Foreign Secretary's talk with Secretary Baker. He also mentioned the possibility of deploying a carrier in this role to Admiral Lanxade, President Mitterand's defence adviser yesterday, who did not seem to think that a carrier was required and that the task could be performed by other vessels. The Defence Secretary has carefully reconsidered the position taking these factors into account.

As the Minister for the Armed Forces explained at OPD(G) on 3rd January, a carrier group headed by HMS ARK Royal was in any case due to sail later this week for a longstanding deployment in the Mediterranean, including useful joint exercises with the Italian Navy. The Defence Secretary does not consider that there is a case for cancelling this deployment. He has, however, been concerned by the scale of enhancements required, costing up to £18M in all; and does not consider the strength of the US case justifies these costs. The presence of these ships in the Mediterranean would nonetheless mean they could reach the Red Sea or Gulf area 10 days quicker than a ship from the UK if a need were to arise. They could offer a wide range of capabilities which might be useful either during or in the aftermath of hostilities. As a prudent contingency, the Defence Secretary therefore plans that a minimum amount of work at a cost of up to £1M should go ahead - mainly wiring - to enable the ships to be rapidly fitted with operational enhancements while deployed in the Mediterranean should this become necessary. This preparatory work will not only allow more rapid enhancement in an emergency but would itself be more expensive if it had to be done at a later stage.

The US would be informed through the same channels that they

Sir Charles Powell KCMG
10 Downing Street



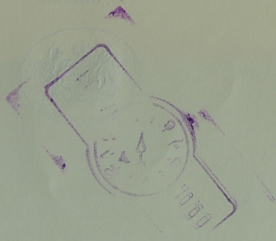
have raised the issue. Our public line will be that no decision has been taken to deploy a carrier to the Red Sea or the Gulf and that the ARK ROYAL group is sailing on a long planned routine deployment to the Mediterranean, unconnected with events in the Gulf, where its programme will include joint exercises with friendly navies. If specific questions are asked about preparations for deployment to the Gulf or Red Sea, we will say this is not presently proposed.

If the Defence Secretary's colleagues are content, we plan to brief the press on these lines on Thursday after OPD(G).

I am sending a copy of this letter to Private Secretaries to members of OPD(G) and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and to Sonia Phippard (Cabinet Office).

Yours sincerely
Jim Webb

(S WEBB)
Private Secretary



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