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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

14 February 1983

LEBANON

When the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary called on the Prime Minister this morning he gave Mrs. Thatcher a brief account of the outcome of Mr. Egerton's visit to Beirut last week and the current position of the British contingent in the multi-national force. Mr. Pym explained that he had asked Mr. Egerton to undertake this visit because he was concerned about some of the signals we were receiving from the area.

Mr. Pym described the position on the ground, illustrating this with a map. He told the Prime Minister that Mr. Egerton had expressed confidence in the British officers commanding the force.

The Prime Minister said that she was somewhat reassured by the proximity to the British contingent of the US troops and of the new Israeli command post which had been established.

A. J. COLES

John Holmes, Esq.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

Prime Minister

I think you will find
the detailed report
very valuable.

A.F.C. ¹⁵ h

14 February 1983

cc. Sir A. Parsons
Mr. Jaehling.

Dear Sir,

Lebanon: MNF

Mr Pym mentioned to the Prime Minister the visit to Beirut of Stephen Egerton and Colonel Stevenson to look at the arrangements for the British contingent to the MNF. You may like to see a copy of Mr Egerton's report. I understand that Colonel Stevenson may be producing a separate report on the military nuts and bolts of the operation.

I am copying this to Richard Mottram (MOD).

Yours ever

(J E Holmes)
Private Secretary

A J Coles Esq
10 Downing Street

VISIT TO BEIRUT 9-11 FEBRUARY 1983

1. Accompanied by Colonel Peter Stevenson of the Directorate of Military Operations, I was asked to visit Beirut to appraise the settling in of the British contingent to the Multinational Force; to look at its liaison arrangements with HM Embassy, other MNF elements, the Israeli Defence Forces and the Lebanese Army; and to see if HM Embassy was adequately staffed to perform its increased duties, given HMA's responsibility for 'the daily political and military direction of the British Force in Lebanon' (BRITFORLEB).
2. Our contingent of approximately 98 men forming a Squadron of the Queen's Dragoon Guards (4 troops with 4 Ferret APCs each) is housed near the suburb of Hadath in a large square-built five-storey concrete block of flats, basically sound and dry, but superficially damaged by small arms fire. The windows have been largely filled in with breeze blocks for security, except for small openings to admit light. The Lebanese authorities are spending approx. £15,000 to repair plumbing and put the building basically to rights; a small detachment of Royal Engineers is helping. The men are comfortably housed and told me they much preferred being in this building to under canvas. The block is situated at a corner of a large and functioning tobacco factory (Régie du Tabac), on the lower slopes of a hill overlooking Beirut Airport and the dug-in US MNF contingent totalling some 1,800 Marines, with support units including tanks and helicopters. There is a superb field of all round vision from the roof of the British HQ, which is manned throughout daylight hours. Our building is on a side road off the old Sidon road which, joining the Beirut/Damascus road closer into town, form an Israeli Main Supply Route (MSR) to their troops further north and east.
3. The day I visited Hadath the Israelis, concerned by terrorist incidents earlier in the week along the MSR, were establishing a Battalion HQ of some 100 men, with two dug-in Centurion tanks and several APCs, some 250 yards west of the British HQ. The Israeli position commands the MSR as it leads into Beirut and should ensure that the sporadic Kataib (Phalange) - Druze artillery exchanges just inland from the British position will be less frequent in future, or nil.
4. I found that the arrival of our troops had been most warmly welcomed by Lebanese civilians in the area, who had sent them settling-in gifts of food, sweetmeats etc to the value of some Lebanese £2,000 (Leb. £6 = £1). A group of pressmen who have been much in evidence have promised our men a second television set, for the joint officers' and senior NCOs' mess.

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5. Our contingent is commanded by Lt Colonel John Cochrane of the Royal Irish Rangers, an alert 40 year old with whom I had several talks, some private. This officer realises that his role as leader of an 'interposition force' is as much political as military, entailing constant liaison with HM Ambassador and the avoidance of all unnecessary risk in carrying out the squadron's function of providing mobile patrols on the flanks of the other (largely infantry) MNF contingents' areas and (probably from 14 February) into East Beirut. Our contingent's Rules of Engagement are tightly drawn, and each soldier's Yellow Card summarising the rules stresses that fire-arms may only be used as a last resort and in self-defence: we may not identify ourselves with any of the local factions, and our job is to spot and report trouble to the LAF, not deal with it ourselves. The CO fully accepts, indeed welcomes these limitations, which differ considerably from the QDG's standing orders in Northern Ireland. He realises the need constantly to remind his men of them. In the Ambassador's view, the main danger to our contingent lies in the risk of ambushes by trouble-makers seeking to involve the Americans, Israelis, or the Phalange; and of straight traffic accidents resulting from the chaotic Beirut traffic conditions. Our base was selected in part because it could be more easily guarded from terrorist action (eg car bombs) than a site in the built-up area.

Lebanese Armed
Forces.

6. An important new development of which I was told is the establishment at US initiative of an intra-MNF contingent communications net centred in the Lebanese Presidency, which is sited about two miles from the British base and manned by liaison officers from all MNF contingents and the Lebanese Army for 24 hours a day. This net includes the Israelis, but not the Phalange or the Druze in the Chouf. It is hoped to keep its existence secret but it seems likely to become known through the Arabic (or British) media sooner rather than later. Militarily it could prove invaluable.

7. Even before the Israelis established their Battalion HQ 250 yards west of our position, liaison between Lt Colonel Cochrane and the local Israeli commander had started. After some initial Israeli concern at our choice of site for the British contingent, which we stressed was at Lebanese suggestion as well as being militarily the most suitable, relations have been good in consequence of our stated intention not to interfere with the Israeli MSR. The Israelis claim that the MSR was established in September 1982 by agreement with Ambassador Draper as part of the price of Israeli withdrawal from West Beirut, and as a consequence of the re-entry of US troops to hold Beirut Airport, as they still do with the Sixth Fleet standing off, a most impressive sight. Our repeated enquiries of the Americans, both in Beirut and in Washington, have elicited the statement that the 'Draper understanding' is unwritten and that they (the US) have nothing against our presence in Hadath in a patrolling role, provided that the Israeli MSR remains unaffected

Main supply
route.

/Ambassador

Ambassador Dillon repeated this to me when I called with HMA on him on 10 February, adding that misunderstandings between the US and Israelis on the extent of the US Marines' 'area of responsibility' had now been sorted out on American not Israeli terms. We told Dillon that we did not see BRITFORLEB having a similar area of responsibility which, given its numerical strength, would be absurd; but rather an area of British interest for patrolling purposes - soon likely to be extended to include East Beirut, at President Gemayel's request. As we saw it, the UK contingent was not responsible for holding, far less holding the ring in, any territorial area, especially in cases of eg hot pursuit by the Israelis against a terrorist target. 'The British are not the enemy'. Dillon listened to these clarifications with interest, adding that the US were glad to have us alongside near the Airport.

8. Given the heavily political and flag-showing role of our contingent, liaison arrangements with HM Ambassador and the Chancery (some seven miles to the North) are obviously crucial. I found them on the whole satisfactory. A UHF radio link between our base at Hadath and Chancery is now operational, though the additional device necessary for secure speech has not yet been delivered or installed because of ex-UK supply difficulties. MOD are following this up urgently. Weekend arrangements, when the Embassy is shut and HM Ambassador up the mountain at his house in 'Abey (one hour's drive), will probably be handled by a link Hadath - British Liaison Officer at Presidential Palace - HMA at 'Abey, and it is Sir D Roberts' intention that this link should be functioning by the weekend beginning 19 February at latest.

9. Lt Colonel Cochrane has his own secure link to MODUK via Cyprus. This is used mainly for administrative, logistic and staff welfare matters, as well as for formal reporting to MOD, but could be used in an emergency (eg if the open link to the Embassy was inoperable, or judged too insecure) for political or intelligence traffic or for seeking political guidance. Normally, however, COMFORLEB would use the Embassy channel for political and intelligence matters. I should add that he has an I-Corps staff sergeant on strength who by US invitation sees their military SIGINT daily at their MNF HQ near the Airport. This is valuable but unprocessed and can defeat readers by its volume. Lt Col Cochrane told me that nevertheless he values the US 'take' highly as it generally gives advance information of local incidents, eg Druze/Kataib. In return the US Marines are likely to ask for 'de visu' information from our Ferret Commanders about other force dispositions in the Beirut area. This seems to me a useful give and take, provided it is kept strictly confidential.

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10. Ordinary telephoning both within the Lebanon and for international calls is highly temperamental and totally insecure. There is no possibility of MODUK arranging a satellite phone link between either the Chancery or the BRITFORLEB base and UK during the three month period of the force's stay at Hadath. It may be feasible to arrange such a 'suitcase link' via DWS, but I am told the cost would be very high. So long as the secure link between COMFORLEB and MODUK via Cyprus exists, I am not sure that the cost of a satellite link (as well) would be justified, but we can ask Hanslope to look into this if Ministers wish.

11. As regards future operational developments, Lt Col Cochrane has it in mind if the settling-in process (and co-existence with the newly-installed Israeli Battalion HQ) go well, to start routine patrols along the old Sidon road towards Beirut and in the Damascus road area assigned to us by LAF in the week beginning 14 February. But if by then President Gemayel has sewn up his discussions with the Phalange so as to enable MNF patrols to operate in the much more densely populated area of East Beirut, our squadron will also mount reconnaissance patrols there (an area completely free of the IDF). This should emphatically demonstrate the central Government's intention to reassert its authority over all its constituent parts, including the Phalange itself: if successful, it should revive Muslim confidence in Gemayel's leadership.

12. I am covering Diplomatic Service and MOD staffing matters in a separate minute. There are some obvious but probably temporary deficiencies and I do not believe that the Embassy can be left understaffed (for whatever accidental, routine or 'rotational' reason) while BRITFORLEB remains in Lebanon and requires exceptional servicing.

13. As well as my call on US Ambassador Dillon, I was taken by HM Ambassador to meet Dr Elie Salem, the Foreign Minister, at the Airport on 11 February. I explained the purpose of my rapid visit to Dr Salem, said that I had seen our contingent settling in at Hadath, and thanked him for the arrangements made by his Government to render our HQ building habitable. Dr Salem repeated his thanks to HMG for making a contingent available - 'each of your Ferret cars flying the Union flag is an Ambassador here for Britain' - and said he had learned a great deal from his calls on Mr Pym and the Prime Minister in November. He hoped he might be able to drop in again during 1983 in London, without formality or fuss, for informal exchanges of view on his way to or from Washington or Paris (I said I felt sure Ministers would welcome this). He sent his warmest personal regards and good wishes to Mr Pym, and through him to Mrs Thatcher. Lebanon would not forget Britain's gesture to her at her time of need. When I asked how the tripartite talks at Khaldeh were going, he said that some progress was

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being made on security arrangements, thanks to US help; but not yet on 'normalisation'. The Israelis in any case had other things on their mind. He then left to greet the Netherlands Foreign Minister, arriving for a short visit to discuss Israeli harassment of Dutch troops seconded to UNIFIL.

Comment

14. This was on the whole a reassuring visit. Lt Colonel Cochrane's calm and methodical approach (and political sense) are complementary to the profound commitment and energy of HM Ambassador, and they have established a sound relationship which should survive the emergencies likely to occur. The base our troops find themselves in was one of at least three originally offered by the Lebanese: in the crowded Phalange-held port, in the Hamra area dominated by the French, and at Hadath, on an unbuilt-up hillside not far from the Presidential Palace and the Ministry of Defence. MOD chose the Hadath site, with HM Ambassador's concurrence, because of its greater military suitability. Once the Israelis convince themselves that we are not there to impede their operations along the MSR, the concern caused by our arrival should dwindle away. A different but very plausible threat identified by HM Ambassador lies in unforeseeable incidents caused by anti-Israeli terrorism or sheer factional mischief-making, which would result in our Ferrets or Land Rovers getting caught in crossfire or contrived traffic accidents. Colonel Cochrane is very aware of these possibilities and has already instructed that when regular patrolling starts (probably on 14 February), our units will avoid setting out whenever an Israeli supply convoy is expected down the old Sidon road: the times can be checked in advance on the intra-MNF signals network which includes the IDF. Similarly, if our patrols hit an Israeli convoy coming back along the MSR, they will pull over and let it through or otherwise direct themselves away from it. The longer withdrawal hangs fire, the greater the dangers of terrorist incidents.

15. I found Beirut itself fairly relaxed and, apart from the terrible but localised devastation, much as I remembered it in the 60's. (Hadath is of course on the road between Beirut and Shemlan.) But the 'business as usual' atmosphere is a front, and trouble between feuding Lebanese factions could start again any time, though the Phalange-Druze truce in the Aley area, and the possibility of Phalange forces moving out of East Beirut by stages from 14 February are modestly encouraging. The presence of the various MNF contingents with part of the Sixth Fleet standing off should be a stabilising factor. However, everything will depend on whether progress towards withdrawal of all foreign forces is made in the tripartite talks. Here the Lebanese believe that President Reagan's prestige is involved and therefore he cannot let the talks fail in the end, even though they may prove very lengthy.

16. All the signs are that the other MNF contingents are settling in for a long stay. HM Ambassador believes that approaches to us to extend our contingent's stay will start being made in March. From the remarks made to me by Dr Elie Salem about informal visits to London (para 13 above), I judge that he intends to see Mr Pym and the Prime Minister himself, to plead the case for an extension beyond 7 May, if earlier appeals to Sir D Roberts are inconclusive.

14 February 1983

S L Egerton

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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

17 February 1983

Lebanon: MNF

The Prime Minister was grateful for your letter of 14 February enclosing Mr. Egerton's detailed report on his recent visit to Beirut, which she has read with interest.

I am copying this letter to Richard Mottram (Ministry of Defence).

A. J. COLES

John Holmes, Esq.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

A large, stylized handwritten signature or set of initials, possibly 'JH', written in dark ink.