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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

8 September 1983

Dear Richard,

Lebanon: Multi-National Force

The Prime Minister held a meeting at Chequers this afternoon at which the situation in the Lebanon and in particular the position of the British contingent in the Multi-National Force were discussed. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Defence Secretary, the Chief of the Defence Staff, Sir Antony Acland, Sir Clive Whitmore, Mr. Bletloch and Sir Anthony Parsons were present.

The Prime Minister observed that the role of the Multi-National Force in the present situation was unclear. She did not believe that we could leave British soldiers for long in an exposed position without a clear aim and instructions. The Chief of the Defence Staff said that the force had never had a significant military task but it had been helpful in showing our interest in the area and demonstrated our solidarity with the United States. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that the effective role of the force had been to provide support for the Lebanese Government. A meeting of the contributors was taking place in Madrid today and the outcome could be expected to be known within a few hours. He believed that we should try to act in cooperation with other participants in the force and consider whether a changed role was possible or desirable. The United States had shown no sign of wishing to remove their contingent. So long as there was a credible government in the Lebanon with a chance of improving its position, the Multi-National Force probably ought to remain. But it might be that events were now moving in the opposite direction.

The Defence Secretary said that the French and the Americans had made it plain that they would retaliate if there was further firing upon their own contingents. At present we ourselves had no capacity to retaliate and had issued no similar warning. The Chief of the Defence Staff stated that it would be possible to send six Buccaneer aircraft to Akrotiri. They could be in position there by the morning of 10 September. This would be an escalatory step. The Prime Minister said that in her view it would be a natural precaution, particularly since the United States and France already had the capability to protect their own people.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that the Foreign Minister for Cyprus had told him yesterday in Madrid that the

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Government of Cyprus had declined to allow the United States to use Larnaca for purposes connected with the Lebanon. So it was possible that if we despatched Buccaneers to Cyprus there would be enquiries from the Cypriot Government as to their purpose. It was pointed out, on the other hand, that Buccaneers frequently went to Cyprus and it might well be that the Cypriots would not be able to sustain any objection to their presence.

The Chief of the Defence Staff said that there were two subsidiary ideas - that we should send out weapons for the Phantoms which were already in Cyprus and that we should speed up the arrival of HMS INVINCIBLE which could be off the coast of the Lebanon next Monday (but its aircraft were not really suitable for the purpose). The Prime Minister expressed the view that the arrival of HMS INVINCIBLE would be more escalatory than Buccaneers. This would be an over-reaction. Sir Clive Whitmore observed that another possibility was to ask the Americans to provide, temporarily, protection for our contingent.

Following further discussion the Prime Minister stated that it was agreed that:

- (a) The Buccaneers should be despatched as soon as possible and it was hoped that they could arrive well before Saturday morning.
- (b) We should meanwhile ask the Americans to provide protection.
- (c) The MOD would issue, at the time they judged appropriate, a statement to the effect that the Buccaneers were on a routine training mission and would also be available for the protection of the British contingent.
- (d) As regards other matters, we should await a report on the meeting in Madrid of the force contributors.

I am copying this letter to Brian Fall (Foreign and Commonwealth Office).

*Yours ever
John Colan.*

Richard Mottram, Esq.,
Ministry of Defence.

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