

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

Prime Minister

The Foreign Secretary thinks that we should not carry out alone the task of guarding the Security Committee talks - but should instead seek to rotate the task with other MNF contributors.

3 October, 1983

A-7 C. 3/12

Dear Michael

Lebanon

As you know we have authorised the Commander of BRITFORLEB to provide a presence at the first few meetings of the Security Committee set up to implement the ceasefire in Beirut. The Foreign Secretary is however concerned that we should think through carefully our involvement in the longer term, particularly given that we could be taking on an open-ended commitment.

The first three meetings of the Security Committee have passed off without incident. Our Chargé d'Affaires in Beirut reports that BRITFORLEB's presence at the meetings of the Security Committee continues to attract favourable comment and publicity from all the parties. There is no doubt that BRITFORLEB has made an indispensable contribution to the vital task of consolidating the ceasefire and starting the process of reconciliation. The good-will which we have earned will increase our influence over the parties and should mitigate the risks to BRITFORLEB if there is a further outbreak of fighting. Sir Geoffrey has noted that the Ministry of Defence do not disagree with the judgement of the Commander of BRITFORLEB that the additional risk of carrying out this task is acceptable, and that he wishes to continue what the Lebanese and his men regard as a vitally important task.

There is no doubt that as time drags on the political benefit to us of this task will diminish. And the risks are likely to increase, particularly if the talks go badly. As long as all parties are involved in the talks and reasonably content, the chances of an attack on the meeting place are reasonably small. But difficulties could arise if one party withdraws or factions within one party begin to criticise the conduct of the talks. There is also a risk that BRITFORLEB will be associated by the Lebanese with any breakdown in the ceasefire talks, with a consequent increase in danger to our troops. Moreover we must have in mind, that, having agreed to this extension of BRITFORLEB's role, it will be harder for us to resist future Lebanese demands that BRITFORLEB operate elsewhere outside the Beirut area.

In these circumstances, the Foreign Secretary thinks that we should continue to afford the protection requested of us, but that we should now seek to rotate the task among some or all of the other MNF contingents (the Americans are in practice unlikely to be acceptable). I understand that there is now a suggestion

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that a 24-hour watch is required. This gives us a good peg. If a firm Lebanese request is made the Foreign Secretary considers that we should reply that this is beyond our capacity, but that we would be glad to approach others (Italians, French or Lebanese Internal Security Forces) to share the job with us. This applies even more obviously to any request to us to provide security for the political (national reconciliation) committee established under the ceasefire.

The Foreign Secretary would be happy to discuss this soon if Mr Heseltine wishes.

I am copying this to John Coles (No 10).

Yours ever

(J E Holmes)
Private Secretary

Richard Mottram Esq
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cc AP

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MO 3/7/4

7th October 1983

Prime Minister

MS

A. J. C. 7/10/83

Dear John

LEBANON

Thank you for your letter of 3rd October about BRITFORLEB's role in providing a presence at further meetings of the Security Committee in Beirut.

The Defence Secretary agrees that this has been a thoroughly worthwhile task for BRITFORLEB, and one which has undoubtedly gained us a great deal of good-will from all the parties concerned. From a military point of view, provided that the task remains at the present level and that there is no increase in the risk to our personnel, its continuation will not represent an unacceptable demand on BRITFORLEB's resources. We should not, however, be able to take on a much expanded task, such as providing a 24 hour guard on the venue for the meeting, since we have neither the resources nor the right mix of personnel for this.

There is undoubtedly a risk that the longer the talks go on, the political benefits of our continuing with this task will diminish, and may even start to rebound on us. We agree that we need to keep a close eye on the way the talks develop, and be prepared to withdraw BRITFORLEB from this role if they look like breaking down, although it would clearly be important to avoid any blame for such a breakdown being attached to us. For this reason Mr Heseltine would not wish to see BRITFORLEB given authority to continue the task for more than two or three days ahead (and subject to daily review in the event of any significant change in circumstances).

The Defence Secretary agrees that there would now be advantage in involving some of the other MNF contingents in this role (the Italians seem to be the most likely to be acceptable to the Druze). Should the suggestion for a 24 hour guard become a formal request, this would present an opportunity to put this idea to the Lebanese. Since a round-the-clock presence would be beyond our own resources, we would have to suggest that others should be involved. Similarly

J E Holmes Esq

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BRITFORLEB involvement in arrangements for meetings of the National Reconciliation Council could clearly put a strain on our limited resources, and there would be strong practical as well as political reasons to involve others.

Mr Heseltine believes that, should these requests not emerge soon, we should consider other ways of making the point to the Lebanese that we should welcome the involvement of other MNF contingents, provided that this can be done without suggesting that we are trying to shed our own role - and thereby losing us the credit we have gained and possibly putting at risk the talks themselves. He would be happy to be guided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary on the best way of carrying this forward.

I am copying this letter to John Coles (No 10).

Yours ever

Robert Mottram

(R C MOTTRAM)

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7 OCT 1983

