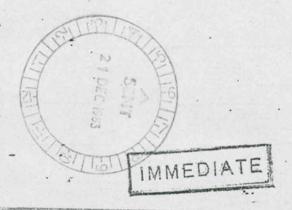
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TO IMMEDIATE FCO

TELEGRAM NUMBER 3826 OF 21 DECEMBER
INFO PRIORITY MIDDLE EAST POSTS, PARIS, ROME, UKMIS NEW YORK
AND UKDEL NATO

PRESIDENT REAGAN'S PRESS CONFERENCE, 20 DECEMBER : MIDDLE EAST.

1. AFTER A BRIEF OPENING STATEMENT ON THE ECONOMY PRESIDENT REAGAN WAS CLOSELY QUESTIONED ABOUT HIS MIDDLE EAST POLICY.

2. HE SAID THAT STRATEGIC COOPERATION WITH ISRAEL WOULD NOT JEOPERDISE THE U.S. ROLE AS PEACEKEEPER. IT WAS NOTHING MORE THAN A REAFFIRMATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP DATING FROM 1948. HE EMPHASISED TO SHAMIR THAT HE WOULD GO FORWARD WITH RELATIONS WITH THE MODERATE ARABS IN ORDER TO ACT AS A CATALYST IN BRINGING PEACE TO THE MIDDLE EAST.

3. THE MIDDLE EAST WAS A TINDERBOX. OF IMPORTANCE TO THE FREE WORLD, WHERE AN UNWANTED WAR COULD START. THE U S WAS DETERMINED TO TRY TO BRING ABOUT PEACE. PROGRESS HAD BEEN MADE WITH THE MODERATE ARABS: SOME HAD ABANDONED THEIR REFUSAL TO LET ISRAEL EXIST. SADAT - GOD REST HIS SOUL - HAD BROKEN THE MOULD. THE GOAL WAS NOW TO FIND MORE LEADERS AND GOVERNMENTS TO QUOTE BECOME EGYPTS UNQUOTE.

4. ASKED ABOUT THE EFFECT OF MARINES DYING IN LEBANON ON U S
PUBLIC OPINION, THE PRESIDENT SAID HE UNDERSTOOD PUBLIC CONCERN
WHICH HAD BEEN SWAYED BY ATTACKS, SOME POLITICALLY - MOTIVATED,
ON THE MARINES PRESENCE. HE LAUNCED INTO A SOMEWHAT DISJOINTED
AND SELECTIVE ACCOUNT OF RECENT HISTORY.

WHE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT HAD COME UNCLUED SEVERAL PEARS AGO.

MORE THAN 1 MILLION PALESTINIAN REFUGEES WHO HAD BEEN IN LEBANON FOR DECADES HAD SET UP THEIR OWN MILITIA - THE PLO MILITARY AND TERRORIST GROUP - WHO HAD NOT ONLY CAUSED TROUBLE IN LEBANON BUT HAD CROSSED INTO NORTHERN ISRAEL AND PREYED ON CIVILIANS THERE. FINALLY THE ISRAELIS HAD CROSSED INTO LEBANON. THEIR FIRST GOAL HAD BEEN TO PUSH THE PLO BACK 25 MILES. BUT THEY HAD KEPT ATTACKING, SO THE ISRAELIS HAD PUSHED FORWARD TO THE EDGE OF BEIRUT WHERE THOUSANDS HAD DIED IN THE FIGHTING. DURING ALL THIS THE LEBANESE HAD ASKED THE SYRIAMS TO COME IN TO HELP PRESERVE ORDER AMONG THE RELIGIOUS AND OTHER RIVAL FACTIONS.

G. ONCE A LEDANESE GOVERNMENT HAD BEEN FORMED AND THE PLO HAD BEEN REJECTED THE MNF HAD GONE IN. THE ISRAELIS, HAVING COMPLETED THEIR MISSION, HAD ANNOUNCED THEIR WILLINGNESS AND INTENTION TO WITHDRAW, AS HAD THE SYRIAMS. BUT THE SYRIAMS HAD QUOTE FOR SOME REASON UNQUOTE RENEGED ON THEIR PROMISE DESPITE A FORMAL LEBANESE REQUEST THAT THEY SHOULD LEAVE. THE MNF'S MISSION WAS UNCHANGED. THEY HAD HELPED TO ARM AND TRAIN THE LAF WHICH WAS NOW A CAPABLE FORCE. WHEN OTHER FOREIGN FORCES WITHDREW AND THE LAF ADVANCED TO ESTABLISH ORDER THE MNF WAS SUPPOSED TO GO BEHIND THEM TO TRY TO HELP ACHIEVE STABILITY AND ORDER. THE ISRAELIS HAD AGREED TO WITHDRAW: SYRIA WAS THE STUMBLING-BLOCK. GEMAYEL WAS MEANWHILE TRYING TO BRING IN OTHER LEBANESE FORCES TO BROADEN THE BASE OF HIS GOVERNMENT.

7. IN REPLY TO QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SAFETY OF THE MARINES REAGAN SAID THAT HE WAS NOT PURSUING A POLICY OF ESCALATION BUT THAT U S FORCES WOULD SHOOT BACK IF ATTACKED. THIS HAD GIVEN PAUSE FOR THOUGHT TO THOSE WHO HAD CONSIDERED THE MNF FAIR GAME. THEY WOULD TRY MORE TERRORIST ACTIVITIES BUT TERRORISM COULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO WIN. FIELD COMMANDERS WERE DOING ALL THEY COULD TO ENSURE THE MARINES' SAFETY. THE REPORTS OF THE PENTAGON INVESTIGATION AND A HOUSE ARMED SERVICES SUB-COMMITTEE ON THE ATTACK ON THE MARINES HQ WOULD BE CONSIDERED BY WEINBERGER IN THE NEXT FEW DAYS. THE PRESIDENT SAID THAT HE STILL HAD FULL CONFIDENCE IN THE MARINE COMMANDANT: THE HQ BUILDING HAD BEEN THE SAFEST PLACE FOR THE MARINES GIVEN THE WEAPONS WHICH HAD BEEN USED AGAINST THEM PRIOR TO 23 OCTOBER.

8. ASKED ABOUT LT GOODMAN, REAGAN SAID THAT HE WAS NOT A PRISONER OF WAR AS THE SYRIANS CLAIMED SINCE NO WAR HAD BEEN DECLARED. HE DID NOT THINK THE SYRIANS WOULD USE HIM AS A HOSTAGE OR BARGAINING CHIP. THE U S WAS DOING ALL IT COULD TO SECURE HIS RELEASE: THIS HAD BEEN HIGH ON THE AGENDA OF RUMSFELD'S TALKS IN DAMASCUS.

9. REAGAN CONCLUDED BY STATING THAT THE MARINES WOULD BE BROUGHT HOME AS SOON AS POSSIBLE AFTER ACCOMPLISHING THEIR MISSION. HE REPEATED THAT HE WOULD TAKE NO DECISION INVOLVING THE LIVES OR SAFETY OF U S SERVICEMEN FOR POLITICAL OR ELECTORAL REASONS.

WRIGHT