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COMMONWEALTH GROUP : MESSAGE FROM PRESIDENT BOTHA

1. THE FOREIGN MINISTER ASKED ME TO CALL THIS AFTERNOON AND HANDED OVER A REPLY FROM THE STATE PRESIDENT TO MRS THATCHER'S RECENT MESSAGE. TEXT IN MIFT. ORIGINAL BY BAG.
2. PIK BOTHA SAID THAT HE HOPED WE WOULD REGARD THIS AS A POSITIVE RESPONSE TO THE COMMENTS MADE BY MRS THATCHER IN HER MESSAGE. THE PRESIDENT WAS NOW LOOKING FOR A FURTHER RESPONSE FROM THE PRIME MINISTER. PIK BOTHA HOPED THAT THIS WOULD ENDORSE THE GENERAL APPROACH SET OUT IN THE PRESIDENT'S LETTER. NO REPLY WOULD BE SENT TO THE COMMONWEALTH GROUP THEMSELVES UNTIL THE PRESIDENT HAD HEARD AGAIN FROM MRS THATCHER.
3. PIK BOTHA ADDED THAT THIS WAS THE LIMIT OF WHAT HE HAD BEEN ABLE TO PERSUADE THE PRESIDENT TO COMMIT HIMSELF TO AT THIS STAGE. THE PRESIDENT WAS PREPARED TO WRITE IN THESE TERMS TO MRS THATCHER BUT NOT YET TO THE EPG. HENCE THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWING THAT THE PRIME MINISTER BROADLY SUPPORTED THE SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT'S PRESENT APPROACH. ARMED WITH THIS, PIK BOTHA WAS CONFIDENT THAT HE WOULD BE ABLE TO PERSUADE THE PRESIDENT TO AUTHORISE A LETTER IN SIMILAR TERMS TO THE EPG IN RESPONSE TO THE PAPER THEY HAD LEFT HERE.

4. I ASKED THE FOREIGN MINISTER WHETHER HE WAS HOPING THAT WE WOULD NOW BE IN TOUCH WITH THE EPG AND EITHER THROUGH THEM OR POSSIBLY DIRECT WITH THE ANC BEFORE THE PRIME MINISTER REPLIED. HE SAID IT WAS OF COURSE UP TO MRS THATCHER TO DECIDE WHAT SHE DID ON RECEIPT OF THE PRESIDENT'S LETTER. HE DID NOT WANT TO SUGGEST THAT IT WOULD BE ESSENTIAL FOR HER TO CONSULT OTHERS BEFORE REPLYING, ALTHOUGH TO DO SO COULD ADD TO THE WEIGHT OF ANYTHING FURTHER SHE WROTE TO THE PRESIDENT. BUT THE IMPORTANT THING IN P.I.K BOTHA'S VIEW WAS THAT THE PRIME MINISTER SHOULD IF POSSIBLE SHOW HERSELF IN AGREEMENT WITH THE IDEAS NOW BEING PUT TO HER. HE ACCEPTED THAT SHE COULD HARDLY BE EXPECTED TO GUARANTEE A PARTICULAR ATTITUDE BY THE ANC.

5. I POINTED OUT THAT THE PRESIDENT'S LETTER STOPPED SHORT OF PROMISING THAT THE SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT WOULD BE ABLE TO TAKE CERTAIN STEPS SUGGESTED BY THE EPG IF THE GOVERNMENT COULD RECEIVE A DEFINITE ASSURANCE ABOUT VIOLENCE CEASING. IT WAS MY UNDERSTANDING THAT THE EPG'S CONCEPT WAS TO SECURE PARALLEL UNDERTAKINGS FROM EACH SIDE. WAS THERE NOT A RISK OF THE ANC BEING ASKED TO GIVE A FIRM COMMITMENT AGAINST A SOUTH AFRICAN UNDERTAKING ONLY OF THE GOVERNMENT BEING PREPARED TO CONSIDER ACTION SUGGESTED BY THE EPG. I ASKED IF SUCH AN UNDERTAKING COULD BE READ AS A CLEAR HINT THAT THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD FIND IT POSSIBLE TO GO AHEAD IN THE EVENT OF AN ASSURANCE FROM THE ANC. P.I.K BOTHA SAID YES. HE ADDED HOWEVER THAT THERE WAS NO WAY IN WHICH THE SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT COULD NEGOTIATE A SYNCHRONISED DEAL IN ADVANCE DIRECTLY WITH THE ANC. FOR ONE THING THIS WOULD BE RESENTED BY OTHER BLACKS WHO WOULD ALSO NEED TO BE INVOLVED IN ANY EVENTUAL DIALOGUE. IN ANY CASE, AS WE WOULD SEE FROM THE TEXT, IT WAS AN ASSURANCE FROM THE EPG RATHER THAN THE ANC WHICH THE SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT WOULD BE NEEDING IN REGARD TO CESSATION OF VIOLENCE (AND HE ADDED IN REGARD TO A SITUATION IN WHICH VIOLENCE NEVERTHELESS CONTINUED).

6. THE FOREIGN MINISTER DREW ATTENTION TO ONE OTHER POINT IN THE TEXT WHERE THE PRESIDENT HAS SET OUT A NUMBER OF POINTS WHICH HE BELIEVED THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT WOULD NOT EXPECT HIM TO NEGOTIATE IN ANY NEW CONSTITUTIONAL ORDER. P. K. BOTHA SAID IT WOULD BE PARTICULARLY HELPFUL IF THE PRIME MINISTER WERE ABLE TO INDICATE UNDERSTANDING FOR THE PRESIDENT'S POSITION IN THIS RESPECT.

7. AS HE LEFT HE OBSERVED THAT WE WERE ON THE BRINK OF A MAJOR BREAKTHROUGH IF MATTERS NOW WENT AHEAD AS HE HOPED. HE REPEATED HIS HOPE FOR A FURTHER LETTER FROM THE PRIME MINISTER WHICH WOULD ENABLE THE PRESIDENT TO RESPOND TO THE COMMONWEALTH GROUP ON THESE LINES.

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