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TO IMMEDIATE FCO

TELEGRAM NUMBER 132 OF 22 MARCH

INFO PRIORITY TEL AVIV, WASHINGTON.

TEL AVIV TELNO 36: TABA

1. BOUTROS GHALI ASKED TO SEE ME LAST NIGHT (BEFORE LEAVING ON ANOTHER AFRICAN TRIP TODAY) TO DISCUSS TABA. HE WONDERED WHETHER THERE WAS ANYTHING WE COULD DO TO HELP IN VIEW OF OUR ROLE IN THE ORIGINAL BOUNDARY DEMARCATION.
2. BOUTROS GHALI SAID THAT ONE DIFFICULTY WITH THE ISRAELIS WAS THAT THEY HAD NO UNDERSTANDING OF EGYPTIAN HISTORY. FOR THE EGYPTIANS THE NAME TABA, AS THE SCENE OF THE LAST CLASH AND SUBSEQUENT BOUNDARY SETTLEMENT BETWEEN EGYPT AND THE FORCES OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE, WAS AS SIGNIFICANT AND EMOTIVE AS FASHODA IN THE HISTORY OF THE SUDAN. THE ISRAELIS HAD BEEN SAYING THAT THE AVERAGE EGYPTIAN KNEW AND CARED LESS ABOUT THEIR TERRITORY IN SINAI THAN DID THE ISRAELIS AFTER ONLY 14 YEARS OF OCCUPATION. WHILE THIS MIGHT BE TRUE OF THE MAN IN THE STREET, SAID BOUTROS, IT WAS EMPHATICALLY NOT TRUE OF THE EGYPTIAN ARMED FORCES, IN WHOSE ANNALS TABA HAD AN HONOURED PLACE, NOR OF EDUCATED PEOPLE LIKE HIMSELF (AND NOT SIMPLY BECAUSE IT WAS HIS GRANDFATHER WHO AS PRIME MINISTER HAD SIGNED THE 1906 TREATY). THE SURRENDER OF TABA COULD WELL CAUSE DISAFFECTION AMONG THE EGYPTIAN MILITARY. AND FOR THE OTHER ARABS IT WOULD OF COURSE BE HAILED AS FINAL PROOF THAT CAMP DAVID MEANT THE LOSS OF ARAB TERRITORY.
3. DESCRIBING HIS OWN AND KAMAL HASSAN ALI'S TALKS IN ISRAEL LAST WEEK, BOUTROS GHALI CONFIRMED THAT THE ISRAELIS HAD NOT ACTUALLY REJECTED THE EGYPTIAN PROPOSAL OF ARBITRATION BY A FACT-FINDING COMMISSION. NOR HAD THEY REPEATED THEIR THREAT TO DELAY THE ENTIRE WITHDRAWAL IF THE ISSUE REMAINED UNRESOLVED, THOUGH IT WAS STRONGLY IMPLIED. BEGIN TOOK THE LINE THAT AS THE TREATY PROVIDED FOR NEGOTIATION IN THE FIRST INSTANCE THEY SHOULD MAKE A MORE SERIOUS EFFORT TO NEGOTIATE AND SHOULD NOT BE MESMERISED BY TARGET DATES (AT ONE POINT SHARON REMARKED THAT NEGOTIATIONS COULD HAPPILY DRAG ON FOR 12 YEARS, TO WHICH BOUTROS HAD REFLECTED THAT THAT WAS EXACTLY WHAT HE WAS AFRAID OF). THE ISRAELIS PURPORTED TO ACCEPT THE EGYPTIAN IDEA THAT THE AREA SHOULD BECOME A NEUTRAL AND DEMILITARISED ZONE PENDING A SETTLEMENT, BUT REJECTED ANY SUGGESTION THAT IT SHOULD BE ADMINISTERED BY A NEUTRAL AUTHORITY OR THAT ISRAELI CIVILIANS AND TOURISTS SHOULD BE DEBARRED FROM CONTINUING TO USE IT.

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THEY HAD HAD TO LISTEN TO A LOT OF SPECIOUS RHETORIC FROM BEGIN ABOUT NOT PREJUDICING THE TREATY FOR THE SAKE OF A FEW HUNDRED METRES AND ABOUT THE UNREASONABLENESS OF DENYING ISRAELI HOLIDAYMAKERS ACCESS TO THE ONE DECENT BEACH IN THE AREA. THE EGYPTIANS FOR THEIR PART HAD ARGUED THAT BY ESCALATING THE ISSUE THE ISRAELIS WOULD BLIGHT ALL THEIR OWN HOPES IN THE FRUITS OF PEACEFUL RELATIONS WITH EGYPT AND NORMALISATION, AND WOULD SCUPPER THE AUTONOMY TALKS FOR GOOD. UNDERNEATH ALL THE ISRAELIS' OBSTINACY AND BLUSTER BOUTROS THOUGHT HE DETECTED A DISTINCT SENSE OF THE WEAKNESS OF THEIR CASE.

4. BOUTROS GHALI TOLD ME THAT THE CABINET UNDER MUBARAK HAD DISCUSSED THE PROBLEM YESTERDAY FOR 3 HOURS, AND DECIDED TO MAKE ONE MORE EFFORT TO NEGOTIATE A SOLUTION DIRECT. OSAMA AL BAZ WOULD GO TO ISRAEL TODAY AND IF NECESSARY THEY WOULD CONTINUE WITH SHARON WHEN HE COMES TO CAIRO. IF THIS FAILED THEY WOULD INVOKE AMERICAN HELP IN ACCORDANCE WITH PRESIDENT CARTER'S LETTER OF MARCH 1979. BUT BOUTROS FEARED THAT THE AMERICANS WITH ALL THEIR OTHER PREOCCUPATIONS WOULD HAVE LITTLE STOMACH FOR A FIGHT WITH THE ISRAELIS ON THIS ISSUE. HE HAD ALREADY HAD AN HOUR'S LECTURE FROM THE US AMBASSADOR IN TEL AVIV ON THE ABSURDITY OF JEOPARDISING THE PEACE TREATY FOR THE SAKE OF A FEW HUNDRED METRES TERRITORY. BUT WHATEVER THE AMERICANS DID OR DID NOT DO EGYPT COULD NOT AFFORD TO ACQUIESCE IN CONTINUED ISRAELI OCCUPATION OF THE DISPUTED AREA.

5. IN ASKING ME TO REPORT ALL THIS BOUTROS EXPRESSED THE HOPE THAT WE WOULD FEEL ABLE TO SAY, ON THE BASIS OF OUR ROLE IN THE 1986 SETTLEMENT AND AFTER STUDYING THE CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTS, THAT WE BELIEVED - IF WE DID - THAT THE EVIDENCE SUPPORTED THE EGYPTIAN CASE. HE DID NOT SUGGEST THAT YOU SHOULD RAISE THE SUBJECT ON YOUR FORTHCOMING VISIT TO ISRAEL, BUT HE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE HELPFUL IF WE COULD IMPRESS OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE FACTS OF THE CASE UPON THE US ADMINISTRATION, WHO HE FEARED WERE UNWILLING TO LOOK THEM IN THE FACE. AS TO THE MOTIVES OF THE ISRAELIS, BOUTROS SAID HE DOUBTED WHETHER THERE WAS A DELIBERATE INTENTION ON BEGIN'S PART TO HUMILIATE EGYPT OR TO EXTRACT MORE THAN HIS POUND OF FLESH. HE THOUGHT THE ORIGINAL DECISION TO BUILD THE HOTEL COMPLEX BEYOND THE BOUNDARY HAD BEEN TAKEN (AFTER MARCH 1979 INCIDENTALLY) BY OFFICIALS, PERHAPS EVEN AT LOCAL LEVEL, BUT MINISTERS NOW FELT THEY COULD NOT GO BACK ON IT.

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