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FM ROME
TO PRIORITY FCO
TELNO 66
OF 081U30Z FEBRUARY 88
INFO PRIORITY ISLAMABAD KABUL

AFGHANISTAN: ASC MEETING WITH ZAHER SHAH

1. SUMMARY: ZAHER SHAH ON GOOD FORM, BUT CONTENT TO BIDE HIS TIME.
2. LORD CRANBORNE (ASC) AND MR JULIAN AMERY MP ARRIVED ROME ON 5 FEBRUARY. AS SUGGESTED BY THE DEPARTMENT, THEY CONTACTED THE MINISTER BEFORE CALLING ON THE EX-KING. CRANBORNE, NOW EN ROUTE TO PESHAWAR, SAID HE WOULD BE IN TOUCH WITH MR BARRINGTON AND WOULD REPORT TO SAD ON HIS RETURN TO LONDON. AMERY, WHO STAYED IN ROME FOR THE WEEKEND, LATER PROVIDED THE MINISTER WITH HIS OWN IMPRESSIONS OF THE CONVERSATION WITH ZAHER SHAH.
3. THIS HAD LASTED OVER 2-1/2 HOURS. ZAHER SHAH WAS ATTENDED BY WALI WHO INTERPRETED. AMERY'S IMPRESSION WAS THAT ZAHER SHAH WAS BOTH PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY ROBUST AND WELL INFORMED OF ALL DEVELOPMENTS. HE HAD, HOWEVER, VOLUNTEERED NOTHING ABOUT HIS MEETING EARLIER THAT DAY WITH THE INDIAN FOREIGN MINISTER. HE HAD REFERRED TO "ANOTHER IMPORTANT VISITOR" BUT DID NOT MENTION NATWAR SINGH BY NAME.
4. AMERY TOLD WOOD THAT ZAHER SHAH HAD TREATED HIM AND CRANBORNE TO A LONG OPENING EXPOSITION WHICH COVERED FAMILIAR GROUND. BUT IN RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS, HE HAD OPENED UP A LITTLE AND MADE SOME OBSERVATIONS OF A MORE PERSONAL NATURE. HE STRESSED THAT HE HAD ALWAYS ENDEAVOURED, AS KING, TO HAVE NORMAL RELATIONS WITH THE COMMUNISTS WHILE KEEPING THEM AT A DISTANCE. HE DOUBTED WHETHER THE RUSSIANS GENUINELY WISHED TO QUIT AFGHANISTAN EXCEPT ON TERMS THAT FAVOURED THE SOVIET UNION. NONETHELESS, HE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE WRONG TO ADOPT AN ENTIRELY NEGATIVE APPROACH TO THE CURRENT NEGOTIATING PROCESS, AND HE BELIEVED THERE MIGHT BE ROOM FOR MANOEUVRE. HE REFERRED APPROVINGLY TO PRESIDENT ZIA'S STANCE. AS REGARDS HIS HOWN POSITION, ZAHER SHAH CONFIRMED HIS READINESS TO ANSWER ANY SUMMONS FROM THE AFGHAN PEOPLE AND TO EXERCISE HIS LEADERSHIP IF THIS WAS REQUIRED FOLLOWING A SOVIET WITHDRAWAL. BUT HE SAID NOTHING TO SUGGEST THAT HE EXPECTED ANY EARLY DEVELOPMENT.

5. AMERY'S ACCOUNT PROVIDES NO FRESH INSIGHTS INTO THE EX-KING'S THINKING OR TACTICS. CRANBORNE, WITH HIS DEEPER ACQUAINTANCE WITH THE SUBJECT, WILL NO DOUBT PROVIDE A MORE DETAILED READ-OUT. WHAT IS, PERHAPS, MORE INTERESTED IS CRANBORNE'S AND AMERY'S IMPRESSION THAT THE EX-KING REMAINS LIVELY AND ACTIVE. APART FROM ONE OR TWO INTERVENTIONS BY WALI, ZAHER SHAH DID MOST OF THE TALKING. NOTWITHSTANDING HIS PRACTICE OF REFUSING INTERVIEWS, HE WAS APPARENTLY VERY WELCOMING TO THESE TWO BRITISH VISITORS AND SAID HE WOULD BE PLEASED TO SEE THEM AGAIN ANY TIME. THIS WAS THEREFORE A USEFUL INITIAL CONTACT WITH THE EX-KING WHICH MAY PAY DIVIDENDS LATER ON. BUT WALI'S PERFORMANCE TO DATE, AND ZAHER SHAH'S EVASIVENESS OVER THE NATWAR SINGH MEETING, HARDLY SUGGEST THAT THEY ARE PREPARED TO TAKE US FULLY INTO THEIR CONFIDENCE.

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