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cc MOD
bc PC

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From the Private Secretary

12 January 1989

See letter.

The Prime Minister has followed the exchange of correspondence between Lord Glenarthur and Mr Hamilton about the question of security for our Embassy in Kabul. She tends to the view that, if the staff of other major embassies in Kabul have armed protection, then our staff should have it too. The precise form which it should take is very much a matter for professional advice. But she would not want our people to feel let down by comparison with the protection given to other embassies.

I am copying this letter to Brian Hawtin (Ministry of Defence).

*Yours sincerely,
Charles Powell*

C. D. POWELL

Stephen Wall, Esq.
Foreign and Commonwealth Office

MRM

7(A-D)

CP (2)



MINISTER OF STATE FOR THE ARMED FORCES

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Prime Minister

COB copy

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D/MIN(AF)/5/3/73

10th January 1989

attached

Dear Simon

will request if required

- Yes please do not

Thank you for your letter of 6 January concerning possible military assistance as part of your contingency planning in relation to the security of our Embassy in Kabul.

I note that you do not at present believe that the level of threat after the Soviet withdrawal is likely to require armed military assistance but, given the likely delays involved in a deployment (particularly in obtaining visas), you have suggested that we should take preparatory action to allow us to send a small armed team relatively quickly if the situation were to deteriorate. While we are, of course, very willing to consider how we might help, I have to say that we are doubtful as to whether this would be the most appropriate response to such a development.

Before we could send servicemen to Kabul we would need to be very clear about the nature of the threat, the task they were expected to undertake and our ability to equip and, if necessary, resupply or withdraw them. The worst thing we could do is send in a team which was inadequate or ill-prepared and equipped. The crux of the problem is that while there is no need at present for military assistance, it is very difficult indeed to predict the range of threats which may arise if the PDPA regime were to collapse. This makes it very difficult to judge in advance what sort of response would be appropriate but, because of the problems of access to and from Kabul, we cannot afford to wait on events. Nevertheless, I must make it clear that we believe that the constraints on the size and equipment of any armed team we might be able to get into Kabul are such

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that it would be adequate only against the lowest level of threat envisaged by the recent JIC paper.

I think we are both agreed that this is not a classic close-protection (ie "bodyguard") task, as there is no specific threat to the Charge or individual staff. A small armed presence might offer protection against a single opportunist gunman trying to force his way in and this, as I understand it, is the level of protection provided, for example, by the Marine guards who are part of the normal staff at the US embassy. But this is a very limited threat indeed and one to which your existing physical security precautions and your Gurkha guard force should act as a considerable deterrent. Your letter accepts that we could not resist an attack by a large body of armed men but, in fact, it would be impossible to provide a realistic defence of the Embassy compound - with a perimeter of nearly a mile and containing some 19 buildings - against armed attack without a sizeable and well equipped military force. Your letter envisages the possibility of bands of armed marauders perhaps seeking loot, hostages or revenge and the intelligence assessments have also drawn attention to the possible dangers in these circumstances from disorganised groups of regime soldiers or even, though more remotely, from an organised threat from PDPA hardliners with nothing to lose. We do not know whether any of these possibilities will arise but a small armed team could do little against them and there is no doubt that if law and order breaks down Kabul is likely to be full of armed men with a wide range of weapons, including relatively heavy support weapons.

I think I should also draw attention to the practical difficulties which we would face in deploying any armed force. We do not know whether the Afghans would grant the necessary visas and, with an anticipated delay of at least three weeks and probably more like six weeks, it would in any case be questionable whether they could reach Kabul before the Soviet withdrawal puts the continued operation of the airport in doubt. Moreover, the only way in which we could send people to Kabul even at present is by Aeroflot or Ariana (Afghan Airlines) which have one flight a week each. Although I understand that in these circumstances you are, exceptionally, prepared to consider the use of the diplomatic bag to carry weapons and equipment but, especially given the airlines involved, this would be bound seriously to constrain what we might send. We are also concerned that if the security situation deteriorated it is probable that we would be unable to resupply or withdraw the force if required.

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It is, of course, for you to judge the diplomatic advantages of staying as opposed to a temporary withdrawal during an uncertain and dangerous transition period but you should not be under any illusions that we could provide any assistance which would materially alter the risks to the embassy staff if order were to break down. If you do decide that the risks are outweighed by the advantages, I believe that the most practical help that we could offer would be a military security adviser and a communications expert. The former would be capable of advising the Charge on the developing threat to the compound and of training and organising the Gurkha guard force to best effect. He and the communicator (although bringing in the necessary satellite communication equipment on the airlines concerned could be very difficult) would also be very useful if it became necessary to contemplate an evacuation.

This would I believe improve your security against what might be called the 'casual' threat, which is I believe the only threat which we could consider resisting. But even against this threat, our best defence is deterrence - although the Gurkhas are unarmed this is not likely to be apparent to a would be intruder (indeed it was news to us). It would certainly have been possible for us to provide training which would allow you to arm the Gurkhas as an additional precaution but I doubt whether there is now sufficient time to do so. It would also be possible to envisage providing a military protection team to provide an overt armed presence as an additional deterrent but the real increase in security would be very marginal indeed and, as I said at the outset, I am very reluctant to send in a military team without a properly defined military task and which would be inadequate against any serious threat to the Embassy - or to themselves.

Despite the very serious reservations I have expressed, I would not want to foreclose any options at present. For that reason, I agree that it would be sensible to approach the Afghans now about visas. My clear preference, if we do provide assistance, would be for a two man team of the sort I have described and I would regard five men as the absolute maximum we might wish to send. Nevertheless, because of the lead times and because the circumstances under which any military assistance might be required and the nature of the task involved are so unclear, it will be necessary to seek visas for about ten people in order to have a sufficient range of military skills on which to draw. I have asked my officials to be in touch with your department on the necessary details. They will have very much to depend on your officials' information about the practicalities - eg equipment - of any possible deployment.

Finally, you referred to costs. The well established precedent for assistance of this sort is that your department would meet the costs involved.

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In view of her close interest in the threat to the British Embassy in Kabul, I am sending a copy of this letter to the Prime Minister and also to Sir Robin Butler.

Yours ever

Archie

ARCHIE HAMILTON

The Lord Glenarthur
Minister of State
Foreign and Commonwealth Office