



With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a Statement about the operation conducted last night at RAF Molesworth to clear the site of trespassers and to fence it.

The then Secretary of State for Defence announced on 17th June 1980 the Government's decision that Molesworth, a disused airfield in Cambridgeshire, had been selected as the second United Kingdom cruise-missile base. The normal process of planning consultation was set in hand towards the end of last year against the requirement to begin major construction on the site this Autumn if deployment by 1988 is to be achieved.

As the House will be aware, RAF Molesworth, as an unfenced and open site, has been the scene of continued trespass by individuals and groups opposed to its use as a cruise missile base. Their activities have given rise to much local anxiety. The anti-nuclear protest groups have made clear their intention to engage in a systematic programme of deliberate delay and disruption, not excluding unlawful means, in order to prevent its development. It would have been quite wrong to allow such a protest to build up on Ministry of Defence land and to accept that the serious inconvenience to local people would continue.

I therefore directed that the necessary steps should be taken to end this as quickly as possible and with the least likelihood of danger to all concerned. To do so, it was necessary to act in secrecy and with speed in order to prevent the very serious problems which would have arisen from the reinforcement of the protesters that had been threatened. This could have led to a major confrontation with all the risks that involved to both demonstrators and those responsible for the maintenance of law and order.

This operation began shortly before midnight last night with the arrival of Ministry of Defence police to clear the site of trespassers and to take control of it. The civil police were responsible for policing outside the site itself. At the same time, 1500 Royal Engineers began to fence off the whole site with dannert-type fencing. They are also providing observation platforms and perimeter lighting which will assist the Ministry of Defence police in their continuing task of guarding the site. In addition members of the Property Services Agency and civil contractors moved heavy equipment onto the site to begin the construction of a permanent weldmesh fence for which planning agreement has already been given.

Mr Speaker this House reaffirmed in October 1983 its support for the NATO twin-track decision on intermediate range nuclear forces. The Government very much hopes that, now that the Soviet Union has returned to the negotiating table, it will be possible to make progress on the arms control element of that decision. But until progress

has been achieved which makes this unnecessary, we shall continue with preparations for the deployment of cruise missiles. That is a decision approved by Parliament. No responsible Secretary of State for Defence, or Government, could countenance such preparations being frustrated by a small, unrepresentative minority within our society.

That is why the action I have described has been undertaken today. I have myself visited Molesworth this morning in order to pass on the Government's thanks to those concerned. The House will I know wish to join me in paying tribute to all those involved in ensuring that this major operation has proceeded so successfully.