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FM PARIS

TO DESKBY 061100Z FCO

TELNO 445

OF 061032Z MAY 88

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INFO SAVING HM CONSULS GENERAL IN FRANCE

MY TELNO 424: THE FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

SUMMARY

1. THE RELEASE OF THE HOSTAGES, AND EVENTS IN NEW CALEDONIA, HAVE BROUGHT LATE UNCERTAINTY TO THE ELECTION. THE CHIRAC CAMP, WHOSE MORALE HAS SOARED, HOPE THAT POPULAR RELIEF WILL TRANSLATE INTO POLITICAL SUPPORT. BUT THE EQUATION MAY BE MORE COMPLICATED. THE CENTRE ARE UNEASY ABOUT CHIRAC'S HANDLING OF BOTH CRISES AND, ALTHOUGH LE PEN HAS APPLAUDED THE DENOUEMENT IN NEW CALEDONIA, HE HAS CONDEMNED CHIRAC FOR NEGOTIATING OVER THE HOSTAGES. I STILL EXPECT MITTERRAND TO WIN.

DETIAL

2. THE RELEASE OF THE THREE FRENCH HOSTAGES IN BEIRUT (MY TELNOS 430, 432 AND 433 OF 5 MAY, NOT TO ALL), AND THE LIBERATION OF THE KIDNAPPED GENDARMES IN NEW CALEDONIA (MY TELNO 442 OF 5 MAY, NOT TO ALL) HAVE BROUGHT LAST MINUTE UNCERTAINTY TO THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN.

3. UNTIL 4 MAY THE PATTERN WAS CLEAR. MITTERRAND'S PROMISE TO UNITE THE COUNTRY AROUND MODERATE POLICIES HAD GIVEN HIM A COMMANDING LEAD. CHIRAC'S ATTEMPTS TO DENT IT, BY CONCENTRATING HIS ATTACKS ON MITTERRAND PERSONALLY, SHOWED LITTLE SIGN OF SUCCESS. (PRIVATE OPINION POLLS SUGGESTED THAT HE WAS TRAILING BY 8-10 PERCENT.) THE HOSTAGES' RELEASE AND THE ACTION IN NEW CALEDONIA HAVE SUDDENLY CHANGED THE PICTURE. THE QUESTION NOW IS WHETHER POPULAR RELIEF, AT WHAT CHIRAC'S CAMP IS CLAIMING AS A DOUBLE SUCCESS, WILL TRANSLATE INTO A SURGE OF POLITICAL SUPPORT THAT WILL ENABLE HIM TO CATCH AND PERHAPS OVERTAKE MITTERRAND.

4. CHIRAC'S SUPPORTERS HOPE SO. THEIR MORALE, BADLY BRUISED BY HIS POOR FIRST ROUND SCORE, HAS BEEN RESTORED. THEY ARE CONVINCED THAT THERE WILL BE A SWING TOWARDS HIM AS HE IS GIVEN CREDIT FOR SOLVING THE LONG-RUNNING LEBANESE HOSTAGE PROBLEM. THEY ALSO BELIEVE THAT HIS DISPLAY OF FIRMNESS OVER NEW CALEDONIA WILL APPEAL TO ELECTORS LOOKING FOR A STRONG, NATIONALIST LEADER, IN PARTICULAR THOSE WHO VOTED FOR LE PEN IN THE FIRST ROUND. BUT THERE ARE FEW CHIRAC

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SUPPORTERS WHO ARE OPTIMISTIC ENOUGH TO COUNT ON VICTORY. GENERAL RELIEF AT THE HOSTAGES' RELEASE IS QUALIFIED BY DOUBTS ABOUT THE PRICE WHICH CHIRAC MAY HAVE PAID, AND SUSPICIONS THAT HE MANIPULATED THE TIMING FOR ELECTORAL REASONS. PRIVATELY THE CENTRE RIGHT ARE UNEASY, WHILE PUBLICLY LE PEN HAS CONDEMNED CHIRAC FOR DOING DEALS WITH TERRORISTS. (THIS ATTACK COULD COST CHIRAC SOME OF THOSE FRONT NATIONAL (FN) VOTES WHICH HE HOPES TO ATTRACT AS THE RESULT OF THE ACTION IN NEW CALEDONIA.)

5. THE NEW CALEDONIA ISSUE MAY ALSO BE LESS STRAIGHT-FORWARD THAN IT APPEARS. THE USE OF FORCE APPEALS TO FN AND RPR VOTERS BUT THE IMPACT ON THE REST OF THE ELECTORATE IS MUCH LESS CERTAIN. SOME IN THE CENTRE ARE CRITICAL OF THE NUMBER OF CASUALTIES INVOLVED IN THE OPERATION (NOW GIVEN AS 21 DEAD). THEY MAY WONDER WHETHER MITTERRAND IS RIGHT TO WARN THAT CHIRAC'S POLICIES RISK PROVOKING SOCIAL CONFRONTATION, NOT ONLY IN NEW CALEDONIA BUT IN METROPOLITAN FRANCE AS WELL. THEY ARE ALSO MORE CONSCIOUS THAN THEIR RPR PARTNERS APPEAR TO BE OF THE RISK OF A BLOODY KANAK REACTION IN THE NEXT 36 HOURS WHICH WOULD OVERSHADOW THE RECENT SUCCESS OF RECOVERING THE KIDNAPPED GENDARMES.

7. THE FALL-OUT FROM THE HOSTAGES' RELEASE AND EVENTS IN NEW CALEDONIA WILL CONTINUE UNTIL VOTING TAKES PLACE. IT IS DIFFICULT TO CALCULATE THE EFFECT, MY GUESS IS THAT CHIRAC WILL BE HELPED BY WHAT HAS HAPPENED BUT NOT DRAMATICALLY, AND NOT ENOUGH TO AFFECT THE OUTCOME OF THE ELECTION. I STILL THINK THAT MITTERRAND WILL WIN. A VICTORY OF 9-10 PERCENT IS NOW LESS LIKELY THAN IT WAS BEFORE THE HOSTAGES WERE RELEASED. MY MONEY IS ON A RESULT IN THE AREA OF 52 PERCENT MITTERRAND 48 PERCENT CHIRAC.

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