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Margaret Thatcher
House of Commons PQs

PRIME MINISTER

FALKLAND ISLANDS

Q1. Mr. Michael Brown

asked the Prime Minister if she will make a statement on the Falkland Islands.

The Prime Minister (Mrs. Margaret Thatcher)

The reply to this question is inevitably longer than usual.

My right hon. Friend John Nott the Secretary of State for Defence made a full statement yesterday. The House would not expect me to go into details about the operations in progress, but our forces on the ground are now moving from the bridgehead. Yesterday my right hon. Friend gave initial figures for casualties on HMS “Coventry” and the “Atlantic Conveyor”. The House will wish to know that the latest information is that one of the crew of HMS “Coventry” is known to have died, 20 are missing and at least 23 of the survivors are injured. Four of those on board the “Atlantic Conveyor” are known to have died, eight are missing, including the master, and five of the survivors are injured. The next of kin have been informed. We all mourn those tragic losses.

Yesterday the United Nations Security Council adopted unanimously a resolution on the Falkland Islands. It reaffirms resolution 502 and requests the Secretary-General to undertake a renewed mission of good offices, to enter into contact with Britain and Argentina with a view to negotiating mutually acceptable conditions for a ceasefire and to report again to the Security Council within seven days. We shall, of course, co-operate fully with the Secretary-General in that.

In voting for the resolution our representative at the United Nations made it clear that, in view of Argentina's continued refusal to implement resolution 502, the only acceptable condition for a ceasefire is that it should be unequivocally linked with a firm and unconditional Argentine commitment immediately to commence withdrawal of its forces from the islands.

Mr. Brown

I thank my right hon. Friend for that detailed reply and acknowledge what she said about the United Nations. Will she take this opportunity to make it clear that the diplomatic proposals that were put forward, and that have been continually put forward by the United Kingdom, contained proposals for a British withdrawal, but that as the position has now changed, and since those proposals have been rejected consistently by Argentina, there can be no question of a British withdrawal of forces?

The Prime Minister

My hon. Friend is quite right. In the published proposals that we debated last Thursday there was a linked withdrawal of British forces and Argentine forces. Those proposals have been withdrawn and as our ambassador to the United Nations made clear when he voted for the resolution, there can now be no question of a British withdrawal. He said: “We are talking about Argentine withdrawal. We cannot now accept that Argentine withdrawal be linked in any way to parallel British withdrawal.”

Mr. Foot

May I first join the right hon. Lady in the expressions of feeling about our forces and their families, and our concern that the fighting should be brought to an end as soon as possible with the minimum number of casualties? On the diplomatic aspect of the matter, to which she referred, while it is clearly true that the reaffirmation of resolution 502 involves the withdrawal of the Argentine forces, does the right hon. Lady also agree

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that it is right, and in conformity with resolution 502, that there should be further proposals on the table, if not necessarily the same as offered previously, nevertheless one that will offer the Argentines an alternative to unconditional surrender? Does the right hon. Lady agree that that is a sensible approach, that it will reduce the danger of casualties, and that it should be included in her response to the Secretary-General?

The Prime Minister

The essential feature of resolution 502 is the unconditional demand for immediate withdrawal of all Argentine forces from the Falklands. That was to be followed by negotiations. Negotiations were, of course, in progress when the Argentine invaded. They had been in progress for some considerable time, but the Falkland Islanders did not wish British sovereignty to pass in any way to the Argentine. We should co-operate with the Secretary-General, but in the terms I have stated.

Mr. Foot

What I was asking the right hon. Lady to do was not in any way in conflict with resolution 502, and certainly not in conflict with what was decided at the United Nations yesterday. But the Government will have to make some response to those proposals. My suggestion—I believe it to be a sensible proposal that will reduce the prospect of casualties—is that the British Government should be making some proposals in response to the Secretary-General's approaches which will offer an alternative to unconditional surrender. If the fighting continues to the bitter end, many more lives will be lost.

The Prime Minister

The objective of sending British forces and to try to retake by force what was taken from us by force is, first, repossession, secondly, restoration of British administration and thirdly, reconstruction, followed by consultation with the islanders—a true consultation—about their wishes and interests in the future.

Mr. Foot

Is that all the right hon. Lady is going to say——

Mr. Nicholas Winterton

I hope so.

Mr. Foot

—in response to the Secretary-General's approaches? The resolution that was passed by the Security Council yesterday was properly supported by the British Government. It envisaged discussions on this matter. I urge the Government to consider more far-reaching proposals than what the right hon. Lady has given from the Dispatch Box today.

The Prime Minister

The talks with the Secretary-General will be about unequivocal withdrawal of Argentine forces in accordance with resolution 502 as a condition for a ceasefire. After that, we shall be in repossession of the islands. We then wish to restore British administration. Administration has to continue under existing British law and under existing democratic institutions. There will be a great deal of reconstruction work to do, and also talk about development of further resources. It will take some time for the islanders to crystallise their views, but then we must have discussions with them about the longer-term interests. It will be most unwise for us to give away any of that in advance.

Q2. Mr. Latham

asked the Prime Minister whether she will make a statement on the Falkland Islands.

The Prime Minister

I refer my hon. Friend to the reply that I have just given.

[column 1051]

Mr. Latham

Since major military action may even now be taking place, will my right hon. Friend confirm that dictatorships rarely understand the moral strength and courage of a democracy and that democracies themselves understand the need to avoid probing questions on military details and secrets that might unintentionally help the enemy?

The Prime Minister

I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We enjoy full freedom of speech in a democracy. I know that my hon. Friend and many hon. Members are very much aware that too much discussion about the timing and details of operations can only help the enemy and hinder and make things more difficult for our forces. In wartime there used to be a phase “Careless talk costs lives”. It still holds good.

Mr. Meacher

Will the right hon. Lady reconsider her answer to my right hon. Friend? In view of the further military pressure that is now being exerted by British forces, will the Prime Minister now undertake to retable the British proposed draft interim agreement so that, without loss of military momentum in the interim but, equally, to avoid risk of substantial loss of life in retaking Port Stanley, these proposals, acceptable to Britain and requiring withdrawal of Argentine forces from the islands, shall lie on the table unamended, ready for immediate Argentine signature as a condition of ceasefire?

The Prime Minister

No, Sir. I reaffirm what I said to the right hon. Gentleman.

Dr. Owen

Will the Prime Minister accept that many hon. Members understand that, following the repossession of part of the Falkland Islands, it is reasonable for the Government to make it clear that the exact parallelism of the withdrawal procedure that was included in the Government's document put before the House of Thursday now has to be rethought? However, will the Prime Minister be careful before she abandons the principles embraced in that document? It won Britain many friends in the world as being a reasonable negotiating position on which it might be possible to achieve withdrawal of the Argentine forces, leading to an honourable negotiated settlement that would last.

The Prime Minister

The proposals in that document were for an interim arrangement so that we should not have further conflict. The proposals in that document were rejected. We have now gone into the islands to do what I believe the islanders wish—to repossess them, to restore British administration, to reconstruct the life of the islands and then to consult the islanders on what they want. That will obviously depend in some measure on what other nations are prepared to do, how much they are prepared to invest, how much they are prepared to develop the islands and, of course, on what arrangements can be procured for the long-term security of the islands. I am sure that that is the right way to approach the problem.

Mr. Temple-Morris

Can my right hon. Friend give any information about whether known arms suppliers to Argentina have agreed to British requests to cease supplies pending a cessation of hostilities? Can she say whether they are keeping their word on this important subject?

The Prime Minister

There appear to be very active efforts on the part of the Argentines to secure further supplies of missiles and spares and armaments in various parts of the world. We have obviously been in touch with [column 1052]the nations concerned about this, and the political heads, but we are very much aware that supplies may be reaching Argentina, not direct from those countries, but through third parties.

Mr. Gordon Wilson

Does the Prime Minister appreciate that the closing quote in her speech yesterday “If England do rest but true” caused considerable offence in Scotland? If this affair is not a purely English one, would the right hon. Lady kindly repair the discourtesy by paying tribute to the sacrifice and role played by Service men of Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish origin?

The Prime Minister

I am sorry if by quoting Shakespeare I caused offence. I did consider it for a moment, but thought that I could not really edit Shakespeare. As a matter of fact, I thought that Shakespeare belonged to Scotland almost as much as to the rest of the United Kingdom. I remind the hon. Gentleman that I went to Perth and made a major speech, in which I pointed out that some of the best characters who are regarded as belonging to the whole of the United Kingdom are distinctly Scottish in character. I gladly pay tribute to them and to the splendid efforts of Scottish Service men, merchant men and people everywhere.

ENGAGEMENTS

Q4. Mr. Dubs

asked the Prime Minister if she will list her official engagements for 27 May.

The Prime Minister

This morning I presided at a meeting of the Cabinet and had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

Mr. Dubs

Does the Prime Minister agree that the long-term security of the islanders and peace in the South Atlantic could be better established were the Government to make a clearer statement at this stage of the basis on which the foundations for such a settlement could be achieved?

The Prime Minister

It is part of democracy that one consults the people themselves to find out their wishes and interests. I should have thought that every hon. Member understood that. After the hostilities are over it will take some time for the views of the islanders to crystallise. Those views will depend in some measure on what other people are prepared to do. All this will take time to talk through, and I am sure that we are right to take that time.

Questions to Ministers

Mr. Tam Dalyell (West Lothian)

On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Recalling that Mr. Speaker Selwyn Lloyd and Mr. Speaker King often used to let Question Time to my right hon. Friend the Member for Huyton (Sir H. Wilson) run for a quarter of an hour extra, and accepting that, quite rightly, the Prime Minister took some time today to answer a substantive question, is there not a case for allowing Prime Minister's Question Time to run to another five minutes?

Mr. Speaker

I well recall, during the days of that extra time, the strong complaints that came from supporters of the right hon. Member for Huyton (Sir H. Wilson).