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From the Private Secretary

4 July 1979

Counter-Terrorist Measures

The Prime Minister has seen Sir John Hunt's minute (A09739) about the contingency arrangements for dealing with terrorist incidents.

The Prime Minister has taken note of the arrangements for the first exercise designed to test procedures for military intervention overseas and has indicated that she will wish to visit the Cabinet Office Briefing Room while this exercise is in progress.

The Prime Minister agrees that a sub-committee of OD should be established to direct the planning and preparation of contingency arrangements for countering terrorism. The Prime Minister also agrees that the Home Secretary, the Defence Secretary and the Secretaries of State for Scotland, Trade and Energy, together with the Attorney General and the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary should serve on this sub-committee; but she wishes to take the chair herself.

The Prime Minister is content with the arrangements envisaged in paragraph 8 of Sir John Hunt's minute.

B. G. CARTLEDGE

M. J. Vile, Esq.,  
Cabinet Office.

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F.R.  
PRIME MINISTER

Counter-Terrorist Measures

You commented on Sir John Hunt's minute below that you would like to take part yourself in the exercise which will soon be taking place to test our new procedures for possible military intervention overseas. The exercise itself will be taking place in Cyprus, controlled from the Cabinet Office Briefing Room. Since this first exercise is largely experimental, Sir John does not consider that any direct Ministerial participation would be appropriate.

I suggest that, on this occasion at any rate, you might simply visit the Cabinet Office Briefing Room while the exercise is in progress in order to familiarise yourself with what is involved. Do you agree?

B.M.

Yes out.

2 July 1979



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Ref. A09739

PRIME MINISTER

*modified - see comments p11*

*Prime Minister  
Agree to the proposals  
in paras. 7 and 8?  
GWH  
2/7/66*

Counter-Terrorist Measures

The purpose of this minute is to seek your approval for the contingency arrangements for dealing with terrorist incidents.

2. A terrorist act in Great Britain is a crime and responsibility for dealing with it normally rests initially with the Chief Officer of Police for the area concerned. Many terrorist incidents do not require direct Government involvement. But in certain cases such involvement would be unavoidable, e.g. where demands are made on Government by terrorists; where other Governments or foreign nationals are involved; where the use of the armed forces is necessary to restore the position; where an incident involving British interests takes place abroad; or where the scale and nature of the threat requires a political or centrally co-ordinated response. Procedures have been developed for handling such cases. The emphasis in all of them is on speed of reaction and flexibility.

3. The control of a terrorist incident in which the Government is involved would be based on the Cabinet Office Briefing Room (COBR) with the exception of terrorist incidents in Northern Ireland which are dealt with separately by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland - operating from the Northern Ireland Operations Room.

4. Depending on the nature of the incident, a variety of Government Departments may be involved, e.g. Department of Energy (offshore oil installations or theft of nuclear materials), Department of Trade (hijacking), the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (international implications or possible intervention overseas). The Home Office are always involved in the case of an incident in Great Britain and the Ministry of Defence where the possibility of the use of the Services is under consideration (as is usually likely).

5. Regular exercises have enabled us to improve the arrangements for rapid and adequate communications; for maintaining close liaison (by sending a team to the scene of the incident) with the Chief Constable or other police officer in operational charge; and for intelligence and technical support. So far the COBR

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has only been activated twice for a real life incident: in January 1975 for the hijacking of a British Airways BAC 1-11 at Heathrow; and in September 1976 for the hijacking of a TWA flight by Croatian nationalists.

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6. Since the successful German intervention at Mogadishu in 1977 our plans have been extended to cover the possibility of military intervention overseas. Such intervention would raise particular problems which do not arise in the United Kingdom and would require a major policy decision. These new procedures have not yet been tested in a full scale exercise but one is planned for the beginning of July. In this first exercise it is intended that the role of Ministers should be simulated by officials. It will include the deployment of a Government team and a simulated military assault on terrorists holding hostages.

*Should refer to idea re: ref. my copy leave and copy to date 2nd 1977*

7. There are two levels at which Ministerial oversight is needed. The first <sup>①</sup> is over the preparation of the contingency arrangements for countering terrorism. This includes not only the procedures for handling different types of incident but also a variety of measures designed to counter the terrorist threat. A number of Departments are concerned in these preparations, which go beyond the normal activities of the police. Although most of the detailed work is done by officials, under the chairmanship of the Permanent Under Secretary in the Home Office (primarily because of Home Office responsibility for the police and the Security Service), it is right that Ministers should know about and approve the plans. Accordingly I recommend the establishment of a sub-committee of the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (OD) for this purpose. There should not be a need for many meetings and most of the Ministerial business can be handled out of Committee in correspondence. I think that ~~the Home Secretary~~ should be Chairman of the Sub-Committee and that

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*Home*  
the other members should be the Secretaries of State for Defence, Scotland, Trade and Energy, together with the Attorney General and ~~either the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary or the Lord Privy Seal.~~

8. The second level of Ministerial participation is over the control in the COBR of an actual incident. To some extent, the nature of the incident will determine which Minister you decide should take charge. For instance, it might be appropriate for the Secretary of State for Trade to co-ordinate action over an aircraft hijacking incident. And it would probably be right for the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary to take charge in the case of intervention overseas. In certain cases you might wish to take charge personally. But since most incidents one can envisage occurring in Great Britain are likely to start with action by the police and, in many cases, may be handled on the ground throughout by the Chief Constable, it may be sensible for the Home Secretary to be given general responsibility for oversight of terrorist arrangements in the COBR. This would provide an essential focal point for those officials who are responsible for recommending the activation of the COBR and would ensure that a senior Minister was briefed to take charge immediately if required.

9. I should be glad to know whether you agree with the arrangements proposed in paragraphs 7 and 8 above.

*Mr.*  
*pp*

(John Hunt)

8th June, 1979