

Foreign and Commonwealth Office



Prime Minister

① London SW1A 2AH

The Foreign Secretary seeks your
 concurrence in the expenditure of £500,000 this financial year
 on the supply & erection of British manufactures prefabricated
 buildings to the Italian earthquake zone. (The money had
 been set aside for compensation to the Iranians for damage to
 their Embassy here.) Agree? Yes no

Dear Michael,

Italian Earthquake Relief

In your letter of 15 December you recorded the Prime Minister's decision that the proposal to send Royal Engineers to Italy be dropped because of difficulties over finding the necessary funds.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary has continued to believe that there was a strong political case (especially in the aftermath of the various significant developments in the Anglo-Italian relationship during 1980) for being seen to do rather more to help over earthquake relief. Towards the end of last year it became apparent that funds originally set aside as compensation to the Iranians for damage to their Embassy in London would not now be required for that purpose in the current financial year. Accordingly, we considered the possibility of making a sum available to support the Royal Engineers' proposal but, shortly before Christmas, a report was received from a Royal Engineers Officer who had visited the earthquake area, which recommended against this on a number of apparently good practical grounds; there was, in any case, no clear consensus between our Embassy and the local Italian authorities about the precise tasks which a Royal Engineers Squadron might undertake. We have therefore not pursued this.

Since then, further reports from HM Embassy Rome and HM Consul-General at Naples, and the efforts of other countries have made it clear that further longer term help from HMG to the victims of the earthquake could have a significant effect in alleviating hardship and would be welcome to the authorities. Moreover there are specific ways in which we could usefully help. In particular, the Italian Relief Coordinator, Signor Zamberletti, has confirmed to HM Ambassador Rome

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that prefabricated buildings of a kind which are available in Britain are badly needed. Subject to the essential premise that the funds are spent within the present financial year, which appears possible to arrange, Lord Carrington accordingly recommends that the Prime Minister should agree that up to £0.5 million be spent on the purchase and transport of British manufactured prefabricated buildings for use in the disaster area.

Lord Carrington envisages that in consultation with the Italian authorities, we should ensure that an appropriate number of the buildings go to the Solofra/Serino area where British aid has so far been concentrated; and proposes that we should keep in reserve the possibility, subject to Ministry of Defence views, of sending a small management team of, say, a dozen Royal Engineers to assist in the erection of the buildings (to be paid for within the same financial ceiling).

We shall need to consider urgently how to make a suitable public impact in Italy and in this country, and if the Prime Minister agrees to the proposal we may want to suggest that she writes to the Italian Prime Minister. But given the need to avoid anything which might seem to commit us to expenditure beyond the present financial year, we shall need to look at this in rather slower time. Meanwhile we shall have to get financial arrangements under way as soon as possible, and I should be grateful for an early reply.

Yours ever,

(F N Richards)
Private Secretary

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RESTRICTED

Italy

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13 January 1980

ITALIAN EARTHQUAKE RELIEF

The Prime Minister has seen your letter to me of 12 January. She agrees that a further £0.5 million may be spent on the purchase of transport of British manufactured prefabricated buildings for use in the disaster area in Southern Italy.

MA

F.N. Richards, Esq.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

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