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Middle East

Meeting of Advisory Committee on UNEF

13 Dec. 56

MEETING OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON UNEF  
HELD ON 13 DECEMBER 1956, at 5:30 p.m.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: With your permission I would, first of all, invite Mr. Bunche and General Martola to say what they have to say on their fronts, although the word "fronts" sounds rather warlike for a peace operation.

Mr. BUNCHE: There is very little, Mr. Secretary-General. There are as of now 3,838 officers and men in Egypt, with 328 members of the RCAF ground crews permanently stationed at Naples. We have just about reached the total in this first stage of those destined for Egypt, with only 155 members of the Indian contingent remaining to be airlifted. Most of those will be taken on the 16th and 17th. With the increase in the Canadian force in accordance with General Burns' request for additional supporting units, the total personnel in the Force when they arrive on the Magnificent will be 4,828. There is practically no one at Naples now that is destined for Egypt. It has cleared up to such an extent that the last scheduled flight of Swissair, under the new contract of occasional flights, has been cancelled. That was due to leave on the 15th, but we do not need it because there will be no personnel to carry and the first sea lift is in prospect to leave on the 22nd to take cargo and equipment from Naples to Port Said.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: I should add, of course, that in the light of this and with the development of the discussions with the Israelis, to which I shall revert, we are beginning to study the question of, so to say, the next phase in the development of the Force. I would use this term "beginning to study" because at the present time it does require some consideration and is certainly not ripe for any report now. But that leads straight on to the question of discussions with the Israelis.

Mr. BUNCHE: Before you do so, might General Martola just add a few words first about the headquarters organization?

GENERAL MARTOLA: It is not very important, but there is some more detailed information about the organization of the headquarters of General Burns. As I already stated last time, it was intended to establish the headquarters at El Ballah. Now he has moved there; he moved yesterday and he is in El Ballah. His headquarters comprises two or three different sections. First, there is the general staff, then the Headquarters Company and then the special staff. The general staff comprises three different sections: Personnel, Operations and Logistics. He has as his Chief of Staff Swedish Colonel Lundqvist. The Aide-de-Camp of General Burns is Indian Captain Khanna, and the Personnel Section is headed by Yugoslav Lieutenant-Colonel Ribaric; the Operations Section by Norwegian Lieutenant-Colonel Moe; and the Logistics Section by Indian Lieutenant-Colonel Antia. The General Staff comprises in all twenty officers, and of these Canada has four, Colombia, one, Denmark one, India six, Norway three, Sweden two, Yugoslavia three, making a total of twenty officers. The Headquarters Company is also headed by an Indian Major. In the Special Staff there are Canadian and Norwegian officers. We have also nominated yesterday a welfare officer, Mr. Widdrington from the United Nations.

Mr. BUNCHE: He is a civilian.

GENERAL MARTOLA: Yes, he is a civilian. Then each country will have a liaison officer, a major or a captain, on the staff.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: Thank you. You should perhaps say a little bit more precisely where this new headquarters is located because the names mean less to our friends than they do to us.

GENERAL MARTOLA: At El Ballah; it is a little north of Ismailia. Ismailia is perhaps a little more familiar. It is, shall we say, in the neighbourhood of Abu Suweir also, five kilometres.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: The closest airport is Abu Suweir.

Mr. MIR KHAN (Pakistan): What sort of communications does he have with you or with Cairo? Does he have radio communication?

GENERAL MARTOLA: Radio communications. It functions very well.

Mr. MIR KHAN (Pakistan): You have radio communications with New York?

GENERAL MARTOLA: Yes, through the United Nations. We communicate through Geneva.

Mr. MIR KHAN (Pakistan): Through the United Nations network?

Mr. BUNCHE: Through the United Nations network with a direct link which has been established between Geneva and Egypt.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: Previously everything was relayed also through Jerusalem, which meant a considerable loss of time.

Are there any questions concerning these technical matters?

May I say one word about the discussions with the Israelis. You have seen circulated the letter I received yesterday, which at least marks formally the end of the matter which we discussed at our last meeting. It is an unreserved assurance that no more destruction and demolition will take place on Sinai. It covers roads, railroads, installations. I prefer to give to the word "installations" a broad interpretation, that is to say, the phase which I personally regret very much and concerning which I have expressed my regrets in very strong terms; this phase has come to an end.

As concerns the other matter, mainly the withdrawal, in one respect matters have been facilitated by what I said -- that is to say, the roads at least will not be more demolished than they are, and we have full information according to the Israelis of the mine fields laid. The stand of the Israelis, as it appeared from the press release to which I really have nothing to add because there is nothing more to be said about it, is that they will this week make a further substantial withdrawal territory-wise, as they call it, to be agreed in detail between the Israeli Commander-in-Chief and General Burns. Then next week they would make another substantial withdrawal and next week and next week, each time subject to agreement with General Burns and General Dayan. That would mean in their own terms that sometime early in January they would have withdrawn from most of the Peninsula. Perhaps it would be desirable to have somewhat greater precision both as to time and as to geography, but for the moment I have not been able to get such further precision.

The question has of course been raised why this is so, why the withdrawal cannot proceed in a more normal way, and the main reply given technically is that they do not wish that any vacuum should develop. I think that from the United Nations point of view the main obstacle for us to follow closely after the Israel troops are the very damages done to the roads, and nothing else. I think, General, that we would be quite able to cover the withdrawal with our own forces. That would of course be especially the case while we can to a greater or lesser extent turn our backs on Port Said and the Port Said problem. There is of course always in this context a political aspect which has been discussed at great length, although I would like to say that, for reasons which I think are obvious to you here, I have considered myself barred from any discussion of anything that might be considered as political conditions for withdrawal, something which is not only outside of my mandate, but also outside of the terms of the resolution itself. However, it would be a kind of ostrich-policy to overlook the fact that there is this political element and that at some stage, in one form or another, it would be necessary to look it in the eye. I do not think that that stage, however, will be reached while the withdrawal, so far indicated, is in progress. The stage will be reached at a fairly late stage of the withdrawal -- that is to say, I guess in a couple of weeks or three weeks from now. The main consideration

which has been publicized in so many ways, that I do not feel that I either commit any indiscretion concerning things in progress or give any kind of free interpretation, is of course the concern of the Israel Government that no such development should take place on Sinai as would involve a renewed threat. That can be given different interpretations. The obvious interpretation from the United Nations point of view, as I see the situation, is that the UNEF is there exactly to separate the forces, but certainly not in order to see to it that some kind of Morgenthau Plan is put into effect in Sinai. I have never seen that as a function for UNEF, and I do not think that is in any way the view of the General Assembly. On the contrary, I have understood the indications of the wish to get somewhere towards a settlement of the Palestine issue and to create conditions where it would be possible to withdraw the Force as an indication of the hope that, during what we may call the UNEF period, it will be possible to create such general conditions politically, such relations between the countries concerned as would make a renewal of the whole situation unlikely. That is to say, I have regarded the UNEF not as instrumental but as a condition for the creation of a better political atmosphere, in whatever way such a political atmosphere can be created, and certainly not either as a condition for, nor as an instrument for, a kind of reshaping of Sinai militarily or in other respects, against what I think are even our legal rights, as I must remember that the resolutions were passed under such clauses of the Charter as to leave completely untouched the general recognition of the sovereignty of all countries concerned. That is to say, there is a basic difference between the public statements of the Israel representatives and what I understand as the stand of the General Assembly in the respect that we both see a major role for the UNEF. I see it in being a safeguard during a period when a political solution should at least be approached and nothing more than that, while the Israelis tend to regard it more directly as an instrument and also for rather concrete purposes, if I understand them correctly, in Sinai and on the other side of the Armistice Demarcation Line. However, as I said, I consider myself as barred from entering upon any discussion about considerations of this type. I have of course, on the other hand, had to restate what is my interpretation of the stand of the General Assembly. Quite frankly,

I do not think I am being presumptuous in feeling that there was no hesitation necessary in my interpretation of that stand. However, I think we can postpone discussion of the political aspects until that later stage when we have made real progress concerning the withdrawal. There are quite a few things which are likely to happen before then. Of course, also by way of the ripening opinion as to the underlying political problems -- (The Secretary-General left the room to receive an urgent call)

Mr. BUNCHE: While we are waiting for Mr. Hammarskjold's return I might add one word that I might have mentioned in connexion with the report on the Force. We have been very fortunate thus far in having no accidents of any kind either in the airlift or in the Sinai Peninsula, which is heavily mined. We have had some near accidents with planes; several have landed with one motor out and the like. But I feel that we should not be surprised if one of these days we get a message that someone has been hurt in Sinai. It would be a miracle if we do not get such a message.

Mr. FREITAS-VALLE (Brazil): Did Israel give the United Nations the plans of the mine fields?

Mr. BUNCHE: We have the maps on the mine fields.

Mr. LALL (India): All ye of little faith. What is all this about preparing us for accidents?

Mr. BUNCHE: Just to make sure that you understand that this is not entirely a pleasant junket. We are told that they have not only the maps but also that the mine fields have been posted, with signs on them. There may be some stray ones, however.

Mr. GUNewardene (Ceylon): Do these mines cover a large part of the Peninsula?

Mr. BUNCHE: We have not had any report from General Burns on the extent to which the mines have been laid, but we would imagine that they were laid very widely. It becomes, you see, a different operation in Sinai from what it had been in the Suez Canal area because in that area the Anglo-French forces had fixed lines and the first action was for the United Nations Force to move in and take over their positions. But the Israelis in the Sinai Peninsula are not entrenched on any fixed lines. Wide-scale patrol activities take place, so there are really no fixed lines to take over. General Burns has made a request actually to move into the area before the Israelis leave, into such places as El Arish; to have our men on the air field, which will be serviceable for us and which we will need for the UNEF forces; to go to the oil well installations -- to make that sort of advance even before the Israelis withdraw from the area. We have had no word as yet as to the Israeli acceptance of this, with the exception of a United Nations detachment -- or more accurately, a United Nations observer -- being sent to one oil installation.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: I am sorry for the interruption.

I really have nothing to add.

I shall try to sum up. We are in the middle of the stream, and when you are in the middle of the stream you know it is very difficult to describe the water; the water is too much in movement.

Mr. Bunche and General Martola have been taking part in these talks. If you have anything to add or to give a recent balance of the picture of how the discussions stand --

Mr. BUNCHE: I think you have summed it up very well. It might be said that they did indicate that we could expect a more precise date in the next talk between General Dayan and General Burns.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: I think, however, that this is step wise -- topographically. I do not think it is the whole plan.

May we, then, in this brief reporting to you, turn to the Canal issue? On that issue, of course, Mr. Katzin is the "Admiral", but, if he will permit me to, I believe that I can, in a certain way, bring out from my angle the salient points -- very briefly.

Two statements were made in the report to the General Assembly on the clearing of the Canal which should be kept in mind in order to have the perspective. One was that it was the intention to negotiate with firms from countries which did not take part in the conflict. The other was that it was proposed that our clearing operation should begin after the withdrawal; it was proposed from the Egyptian side -- I did not endorse the proposal; I did not say "no", and I did not say "yes". This did involve certain problems of principle. One problem related, obviously, to the use of the Anglo-French resources; another referred to the exact timetable. I felt that it was wise -- as is so very often the case with problems of this type -- to choose a very pragmatic approach, because, as you know, when matters of this type are treated on a practical level, very often the question of principle never arises.

It seemed to me that that would be quite true of the first stage, because the Anglo-French plans for withdrawal were such that they would have a full job to do, in the places where anything could be done -- Port Said, and so forth -- until the end of the withdrawal; and, at the end of the withdrawal, it would suit us to get into the show ourselves. That is to say, the relationship between the timetable for withdrawal and the timetable for the operation did not give rise to any difficulty.

On the other score, our equipment on the whole was sufficient for a long-haul operation; for a short-haul operation, we wanted some supplementary units from the Anglo-French fleet. That was the basic situation which did not, so to speak, present any immediate grave complications.

The situation today is slightly more involved -- and for different reasons. The withdrawal has drawn out a little bit more in time than had perhaps been expected. This, of course, has created some impatience which would otherwise not have developed in connexion with beginning the operation.

The first resolution said that steps should be taken for clearing the Canal when the cease-fire became effective. This is one of those slightly ambiguous terms which the General Assembly used at a certain stage of its development. I have read the phrase "when the cease-fire became effective" as being in no way synonymous with a formal declaration of the cease-fire but, rather, as referring to a state of fact. For my part, I considered that the cease-fire certainly did not become effective until the direct, face-to-face, as it were, arrangement of foreign troops against each other had been at least for the main part liquidated. That is to say, I felt that the statement "when the cease-fire became effective" was not too far from the statement "after, or around, or soon before withdrawal". There really was a bridge, as it were, which linked up very closely.

The matter, however, has another and a much more essential practical aspect. When the General Assembly said "when the cease-fire became effective", it must have meant -- to my way of reading it -- something which seems to be common sense: The United Nations could under no circumstances bring large neutral units into the Canal so long as there was any risk of the resumption of hostilities. That just would not make sense -- whatever the Egyptians or the British or the French had said. In other words, the phrase had to be interpreted in such a way that we could feel that the work was not under any kind of war risk. This, again, brings us very close to the idea that it must be closely related in time to the withdrawal. I would not say the next day, or the day before, the withdrawal -- but it must be closely related in time to the withdrawal.

If I look now at the situation as it is today, I may say that certain developments have taken place. We have had a softening of the attitude as regards the resources used. A fortnight ago, the Egyptians accepted our using equipment from whatever country, or whatever origin, but took the stand -- which I, for my part, consider to be politically natural -- that, while Anglo-French forces were still in occupation, the Egyptians just could not consent to Anglo-French forces being used in the operation, under the United Nations flag. I have felt that, if that stand in principle were maintained very firmly, it would run us into practical difficulties which would hamper the operation and would lead to delay.

For that reason, I have asserted, against the Egyptian principle -- not an opposite principle, which I do not think is defensible -- but the practical needs, indicating on the one hand, that to the extent that we took over British and French ships we would need a transition period in which our own crews, although highly qualified, would need some guidance, so to speak, in order to run the ships as well as possible (they have no exact experience of those individual ships); and, on the other hand, that all those British or French ships which were engaged in salvage operations, connected with, so to speak, wrecks hanging on the wires, should continue until they had completed that work. Thus, there should be no interruption in what was going on in Port Said, on the northern end of the Canal. The ships should continue, the crews should continue, until the work had been brought to an end.

Those were my counter-proposals, so to speak, to the basic stand which, in a certain sense, I recognized as an understandable viewpoint, but which I felt in practice had to be modified in order not to interfere with the speediest possible completion of the salvage operation.

On the British-French side, there are two problems. On the one hand, they regard with great reluctance the splitting up of the fleet they have assembled; and, on the other hand, they regard with equal reluctance the use by the United Nations of these ships without British and French crews. This matter is still being discussed. As members of this Committee will see, the straight Anglo-French stand is impossible to reconcile with our stand, and the straight Egyptian stand is impossible to reconcile with our stand -- our stand, in fact, representing a compromise which, as I have said, recognizes the Egyptian principle as a political fact but tries to modify it to the extent such modification is necessary, in order to enable us to say that no political considerations will come into play which in any way will delay the operation as such.

That has seemed to me to be the common-sense approach. Needless to say, I do hope that that is also an approach which, in the final analysis, will be accepted by the two sides. In any case, I have not found any better alternative, because the two flank positions both seem to me to be very difficult for the United Nations to accept: the Egyptian stand, because it would mean an undue delay in the operation; the Anglo-French stand, because it would mean establishing a political pressure on Egypt for which I do not see any direct justification in our needs.

That, I think, is a summary of the political situation. It is still under debate, and I think that it would be premature to forecast any outcome. Of course, I hope that the debate will be completed so speedily as not in itself to interfere with the rapid operation -- for it would really be an absurdity if it were to interfere.

I would now ask Mr. Katzin to add whatever he feels should be added in order to give a clear picture. I do not think that we need to go into the subtleties of what kind of ships are in Port Said, and so forth, but he might perhaps refer to the phrasing, because the notions about the scope of the problem have been running somewhat wild.

Mr. KATZIN: General Wheeler has now visited both the southern and northern ends of the Canal. He finds that, out of the twenty-nine obstructions, nine are effectively blocking the passage of ships of minimum draught -- that is, 10,000 tons. Those nine are being moved as rapidly as possible, in order to open a channel and thus give through passage, since a channel for ships of the same draught has already been opened from the El Fuad-Port Said area. For the work of clearing those nine vessels, we have five vessels assembled already in Port Said; another five will be there within two days, or three days at the most -- making ten vessels available for the purpose. We are, however, for that first phase of lifting those nine vessels, short of some lifting craft, and in this connexion we have approached the Anglo-French forces, since the lifting craft is essential for the opening of the first passage rapidly, but is not so essential to the second phase, which is more of a salvage job proper; that is the difficult task of pumping the ships up with air and lifting them up.

For reasons which the Secretary-General has already mentioned, we hope that these nine vessels will be manned by technical crews from Belgium, Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands, which have been assembled for the purpose. At the moment, however, there is some reluctance to proceed on that basis. We cannot yet say whether or not we shall have them.

General Wheeler reports that, immediately upon getting the green light, he can proceed with what he has to lift those vessels without very much delay; but there would be some delay -- a slight delay -- if the craft were denied us. That is the situation on the southern end.

At the moment, a survey is being made by divers and technicians in the south. They were working up from the southern end of the Canal, and expect eventually to arrive at El Fuad. Their reports are not yet at hand as to the length of time it will take to remove the blockage, but the preliminary estimates -- based on cursory observations -- are reasonably optimistic as to time.

In addition, we have information that vessels which we have down south of the Suez end are on their way up to Suez and will probably go into Suez under the escort of Egyptian vessels. That information, however, has not yet been confirmed by General Wheeler. We have a notification from the salvour companies which have been instructed to move the vessels, but that is subject to confirmation and may have to be corrected.

On the northern end, there is already -- as I told the Committee last week -- one channel open for ships up to 10,000-ton draught, which completes the first phase of the combined objective. The remaining channel, the wider channel, is blocked by eight ships at the moment -- all of which are being worked on by fifteen Anglo-French vessels. The estimates received to date concerning the completion of that work are as follows: approximately 20 December for a good number of the ships, and 10 January, at the latest, for the remaining two or three. With the use of those vessels, therefore, the main channel in Port Said should be unblocked for the most part by Christmas at the latest, the remainder being unblocked by mid-January, if the estimate of 10 January proves to be a few days off.

The position of General Wheeler and his advisers is that, with the craft which are scheduled to arrive through December, plus the vessels which have been requested from the Anglo-French fleet, there will be no undue delay in clearing the second phase of the southern half of the channel, which has a total of twenty-nine ships. There is some difference between the estimate of the British Admiral in charge of the Anglo-French fleet and that of General Wheeler. We are not in a position here at this moment to estimate the difference until the survey has been completed, when I think we shall be able to have more accurate information.

That, I think, briefly describes the situation as regards the clearance of the Canal.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: My conclusion is that if we can overcome this initial negotiation point -- because it is really nothing more than a negotiation point -- the prospects are on the whole good. I think that General Wheeler and his people have the natural tendency to put themselves on the safe side and not to make any promises that they are not sure they can keep. For that reason, what I really do hope is that within the next couple of days we shall have green lights all through and simply proceed -- or, rather, that what is going on will continue until the evacuation day, and that on that day we can without any delay, with the build-up we have, continue in the regions where we have so far, for the reasons I have mentioned, not been able to get started.

I think that the time differences involved between the various alternatives before us are in no way dramatic, if I understand the various estimates correctly. General Wheeler has indicated -- and I must trust his judgement -- that it would be a loss of time if we could not get the ships we should like to have, but, according to him, the loss of time would be of modest proportions; personally, I can have no opinion on that score.

There is one other point I should like to mention. I feel that, as an executive, I am getting into a more and more bewildering situation, because, cost-wise, this is a very, very big story and I have no cash. I have drawn attention to this, and I guess that some extraordinary tiding-over arrangement will have to be made. I do not believe that this is anything which would worry the General Assembly. It would, however, be a new irregular move, and I am not too much in favour of it. I should like us to get back to normalcy, even in administrative respects.

I hope that the exposition which has been given at this meeting has done away with some of the rather rampant fears which have been strongly felt -- and also on the thirty-eighth floor -- for the last few days.

Mr. GUNewardene (Ceylon): Have you accepted the British offer of ships and equipment? My Prime Minister cabled me that some offer had been made; he thought that it would be a very satisfactory offer and asked me to commend it to you.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: There is full acceptance, so to speak, of all equipment; but the selection must be made, naturally, by those who have the technical responsibility. I think that even the British would say that they may have over-equipped their fleet. If they were then to combine their fleet with ours, I think it could safely be said that that would be a little bit too much. That, however, I leave entirely to General Wheeler, who is competent to judge. The problem is related only to the question of whether or not to use, necessarily, the old crews for the old ships. That is still under discussion, and, for that reason, it is premature for me to say what should be the solution on either side. As I have said, our stand is that they should be used, and we gratefully accept the offers to the entire extent necessary to avoid any loss of time.

Mr. GUNewardene (Ceylon): When do you expect the final withdrawal of British and French forces? Has there been any indication?

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: I have expectations, but I do not think that I should put them on record. It is usually better to have news when it is a question of facts and not advance rumours, because things may change.

I should like, if the Committee agrees, to continue to have short meetings of this kind to keep members au courant. That would, from our point of view, be most helpful.

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