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Middle East

Meeting of Advisory Committee on UNEF

18 Dec. 56

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CONFIDENTIAL

MEETING OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE FOR UNEF HELD IN THE
~~OFFICE OF THE~~ SECRETARY-GENERAL'S CONFERENCE ROOM

at 10 a.m. on 18 December 1956

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: Gentlemen, I suggest that as a first point today I might ask General Martola to indicate what we know about the current incidents in Port Said.

General MARTOLA: In the light of telegrams we have received from Egypt, it seems now that the French and British troops have withdrawn themselves to a relatively narrow area in Port Said. This area is surrounded by barbed wire fences and they are loading their troops and material on ships. Our troops have taken positions outside those barbed wires, directly in front of Port Said's Arab quarter. The situation seems to be normal.

However, this situation was preceded by some incidents which were not of a very agreeable character. On 14 December, at 22 hours in the evening, three hand grenades were thrown and some fire was opened on a Norwegian jeep patrol. Fire was returned. The following morning, 15 December, at 5 o'clock local time, a Swedish patrol was fired on, but there were no casualties. General Burns naturally protested energetically before the Egyptian Government and requested that they should broadcast instructions to the Egyptians in Port Said that they should refrain from attacks and acts of violence during the period of withdrawal.

The 16th, in the evening, there was a series of serious incidents with British units which were attacked in the Arab town. A British Company Commander was wounded and died later on. There were a number of casualties on the Egyptian side. Upon this, as I understand, the British units and the French withdrew behind the barbed wire and the UNEF troops took position early in the morning of 17 December, between the Arab quarter and this barbed wire area. At the same time, UNEF took position and is controlling the two main arteries which separate the Arab section from the area still occupied by the British forces. When our troops took position, at 6 o'clock local time, they were fired upon, but in the UNEF Commander's opinion, it was, without any doubt, a mistake, since the sniper did not know apparently about UNEF's action.

The UNEF Commander in Port Said has said that UNEF, in co-operation with the local police, will be able to control the situation. There are about 800 in the

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Egyptian police in Port Said. The Egyptian Governor, Mohammed Riad, has agreed to UNEF's suggestion that a dusk-to-dawn curfew be kept up in some sectors of Port Said under UNEF control.

It also seems that Egyptian police now are able to move and operate the UNEF controlled area and in other areas outside the Anglo-French zones. UNEF is prepared to let Egyptian police take over security and responsibility just as soon as they are able to take over, after the withdrawal of the French and British forces. The barbed wires have been set up by the French and the British only to protect their embarkation and arrangements have been made with the British forces for the UNEF taking over all war prisoners that they hold following evacuation.

As I said at the beginning of this report, the situation seems to be very well in hand by UNEF troops. There are clear signs that UNEF is able to control the security of the city in co-operation with Egyptian civil authorities and the police, and the civilian life is returning to normal in this Mediterranean city. UNEF have made up a UNEF Local Civil Affairs Section. This Section is taking care of civil affairs such as public health, electricity and gas and sewage. The International Red Cross is also very active: food has been distributed through this organization.

The ~~SECRETARY-GENERAL~~: Thank you. Are there any questions? I just felt that we should inform you about it. It is of course very regrettable and I guess that the next few days will give us further disclosures. But I do not think one should say that it is in any way surprising, and if we could keep it back, and nothing more happens, I think we should be quite satisfied. I must say that I have been very gratified with the reports as mentioned here by General Martola, which seem to indicate that UNEF, in co-operation with Egyptian civilian police, is in perfect control of the situation where they have a very heavy responsibility.

Mr. LALL (India): Thank you, Mr. Secretary-General. There are just three very brief questions which seem to me to arise. One is this: that General Martola mentioned war prisoners now in the hands of the British and the French being taken over by UNEF. I would like a little clarification of that.

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Is UNEF going to hold these war prisoners? That seems to me to be quite an operation and I trust that will not happen. In that connexion may I mention another point about prisoners. There was a newspaper report -- which, naturally, one treats simply as such -- that the British might take away a couple of hundred hostages unless the poor officer who is lost is delivered up to them. There has been one man who has been kidnapped. Now will it be permissible that they should take away 200 hostages? It will not fit in with this other point mentioned by the General that all war prisoners will be taken over by UNEF. I should like some light on both these points. One, I admit is just a rumour. Secondly, I would also like to know what UNEF would do with war prisoners.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: I do not think you need to be worried.

General MARTOLA: May I answer? First of all, in the telegram we have from Egypt, there is no question about French war prisoners, only British. Arrangements have been made with the British for UNEF taking over all war prisoners that they hold, following evacuation. I suppose that those prisoners they hold now are a result of the British officer who has been taken by the Egyptians. So that they are not the war prisoners who were taken at the beginning of the British action. And I read in the paper today that the French have taken their prisoners with them on their boats. As you say, naturally we will not have them take over. Apparently we are handing them over quite soon to the Egyptians. We have no idea of holding them for a long time.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: There is a background I would like to mention and that is that the first of last week the Egyptians made a request to the effect that we would, good-offices-wise, raise the question of the British who have taken prisoners to Cyprus. That was of course done. I do not know of any later development. But that is a matter consequently which is up for discussion. It has a link with one other problem and that is that there are some 450 British personnel from the whole Canal bases interned in Egypt and they should, under the old Canal evacuation agreement, have been repatriated. So there is an exchange problem of comparatively small size, an exchange problem which is developing, and it has not ripened. People on both sides have been

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too engaged on other matters. It is quite obvious that the United Nations role in that is a strictly limited one.

Mr. LALL (India): Just good offices.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: Just good offices. It cannot be anything else.

Mr. LALL (India): Is UNEF seized of this problem of exchange of men?

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: The United Nations is seized in the sense that we have been asked for good offices.

Mr. LALL (India): Yes.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: But as regards UNEF, I do not know of any specific context in this function at all. The first one was the United Nations, and the other UNEF.

Mr. LALL (India): I have two other small points. One, may I know whether there were in fact any UNEF casualties?

General MARTOLA: None.

Mr. BUNCHE: There have been no UNEF casualties at all since the beginning of the operation.

Mr. LALL (India): May I then ask, finally, whether there is, in the view of the Commander, better understanding and therefore some acceptance in the Port Said area of UNEF, because it does seem that part of these incidents, at any rate, was due to lack of realization of what UNEF was and what it was doing.

Mr. BUNCHE: It seems from the cables that there was mistaken identity.

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Mr. LALL (India): Exactly. Mistaken identity. Well, that is a great pity.

Mr. BUNCHE: It was at night.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: It is unavoidable. We have no sign of animosity against UNEF. I do not know of any signs.

Mr. BUNCHE: In one instance UNEF was taking over from the British who were withdrawing, but apparently the Egyptians in the area were not aware of it.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: What I have seen of the Egyptian Press continues to be definitely favourable to UNEF and the United Nations.

Mr. BUNCHE: In other words, to make it quite clear, we have no definite information of any deliberate attack on UNEF in Port Said.

Mr. LALL (India): Is there any public relations being done on this aspect?

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: Oh yes. But it is much better done by the Egyptians than by us.

Mr. LALL (India): Precisely. I trust that is being done.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: Oh yes. If you look at the Press you will see it. To take a somewhat ridiculous and amusing example, my not-very-remarkable statement was printed within a framed picture on the front page of the Cairo papers. I mention it with a smile because it is completely insignificant in itself. But it does show the tendency, so to say, to play up the United Nations as a peace factor.

Mr. LALL (India): Thank you very much. That is all I have to ask.

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The SECRETARY-GENERAL: We will then turn to the Canal stories and I think that at this stage, since we do not have much time, with the General Assembly meeting, the best thing to do would be to give you very briefly the development of the problem negotiation-wise. You will remember that the report to the General Assembly was based on the assumption that private firms should be approached from countries outside the conflict and the United Nations salvage fleet built up on that basis. That was also the line approved by the General Assembly and the line followed by General Wheeler and his collaborators like Colonel Katzin, with a result which must be considered satisfactory in the sense that we managed to build up very quickly what obviously is a highly competent fleet.

It was obvious that the General Assembly's attitude was that with recognition of the political problems involved, not only transition-wise but as a consequence of the conflict, which yet is not very far back of us if it is back of us at all, the question of inclusion of British-French units in the salvage operation was a very delicate one. Before the decision of withdrawal, the matter was discussed with the British and on that point it was made clear from me that I would be free and that we would be free to use all equipment. The question of crews was left in the following shape: The Egyptian Government said: we cannot see any possibility to use crews as matters stand. I said that I had to note it, but I left the question open because I reserved my right to use such crews or to raise the issue again.

It is in this context of some significance that the stand of the British Cabinet was expressed in the General Assembly before the vote on this whole operation by Mr. Selwyn Lloyd in the following words: that Great Britain would co-operate, or rather would work "in any way wanted" for the task. Later the problem was developed. We have made two requests. One is for the following up of all current operations in Port Said. Colonel Katzin can give you more details. The other is for the use of six specially equipped, not self-propelling, ships with cranes down the Canal. In the first case we had no reason to go into the question of crews at all because it was a transitional follow up and it should of course be done with the present crews. In the second case, taking them down the Canal seemed to us to indicate that it was a clear case where we should run with our own crews and where the necessity we had for assistance was just one of, so to say, teaching our crews the tricks, if any, with this equipment.

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You have seen these two requests restated by Mr. Selwyn Lloyd in Parliament yesterday.

In the discussions which have followed, the British have taken two stands which have considerably modified what I understood to be the initial stand as expressed in the General Assembly. The first was an all or nothing stand. Either you take the whole assembled fleet, which finally would amount to some forty ships and crews -- up to 1,500 certainly -- or else you will not get any ship. From my point of view it was quite obvious that such a stand was inadmissible and definitely out of line with the whole concept of the General Assembly. We cannot be forced to take over in this case any more than we can be forced to take over in another case. We have contracted for our own fleet to the extent that we said, and to supplement our fleet. Of course, we should negotiate for those supplements, but we run it on the basis that we more or less should push our own results aside and take over the whole operation with this very important crew element involved.

To that extent it seemed to me to be, as I said, out of the question. The crew element I mentioned, and that is necessary because at about the same stage -- and that is not less than a fortnight ago -- the British stand was that no British ship could serve without a British crew; that is to say, the original explanation, the original statement of the British Government has now become qualified so that it was not "in any way wanted", but it was the full fleet with its British crews.

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We maintained our stand that we needed the completion of the operation of Port Said and that we needed the six ships as a complement to our own fleet. It would not save us very much time; but it would save us a few weeks, and that was important enough. We wanted to work with our own crews with only a few officers added for a transition period in order, so to say, to hand over in the proper way to our crews. The situation developed further last Saturday in the sense that the security problem was introduced with the suggestion that armed UN sentries should be put on each vessel, authorized to open fire not only in their own defence but generally with very wide powers, that UN forces should cover the ships from one Canal bank, and that UN patrols should protect the road and convoys of stores, and so on.

That meant, as you see, a fairly far-reaching suggestion for the use of UNEF in a combined operation with the salvage fleet. At the same time, it was said that this matter had to be settled before Monday morning, New York time, or else the salvage fleet would be ordered to withdraw.

I pointed out two things: first of all, of course, that these were very far-reaching proposals, with serious implications in principle and substance; further, that within the forty hours at our disposal there was, of course, no possibility -- even if I accepted the line -- to negotiate such a line, which would require conversations. The result was that the stand was modified and that we were, so to say, supposed to find out what formula for security we considered satisfactory and to use that formula. Further, the order to withdraw the fleet would be postponed twenty-four hours -- that is to say, instead of Monday morning it would be postponed until Tuesday morning. In this situation, in order to clarify the stand, I have approached the British Cabinet pointing out what I think I can sum up most easily by a few quotations from a letter. This relates to the situation as of yesterday evening.

The request for special security measures presented last Saturday indicates that the crews themselves considered certain security arrangements as representing a minimum solution.

I should have mentioned that this suggestion had been discussed with the crews.

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The arrangements suggested should, I believe, be generally recognized as raising acute political problems out of proportion to the specific interests involved, and I note with satisfaction that in the suggested agreement you do not insist on those arrangements as conditions for co-operation. However, the substance reflected in those security arrangements cannot be neglected. They do indicate what both the British authorities and the crews regard as the minimum security arrangement, indicating a recognition of special risks involved in the use under the present circumstances of British crews on British ships down the Canal.

In considering this matter the Secretary-General must weigh the disadvantages involved in the following alternatives:

- (a) The sacrifice of the use of the six ships in question because of the condition that they must be used with their crews;
- (b) The use of the ships without their crews;

and, of course, finally,

- (c) The use of the ships with British crews.

Now if we make a comparison between the use of the ships without British crews and the use of the ships with British crews the time difference is very small. According to all the information we have there is always some loss of time in taking over, but it is not a big matter. In fact, as the use of the ships with British crews would involve rather complicated security measures which one cannot quite overlook, it may well be that the advantage, in comparison between the two, of just going on with the British crews is cancelled out by the loss of time required for the security measures. I would say, for that reason, that it is an open question which, technically, would be the best line.

However, for the British there has been so far no question about the use of the ships without British crews, and therefore, for that reason, the real comparison I have to make is the comparison between the situation if we do not get the six ships and the situation if we get the six ships with British crews. That does represent a time difference; it is very difficult to evaluate. It is a question of some few weeks -- again a very limited period, but some few weeks, nevertheless.

Well, I have had to weigh these two things against each other, without disregarding the Egyptian stand on principle. I thus have to compare a

situation where we would lose a few weeks by insistence on my line -- without the crews. On the other hand, we would have to run the operation with a very obvious security risk all the time of the type we have seen in Port Said which, even if I were to break through the Egyptian resistance, might easily mean that the beginning of the salvage operation would be, so to say, punctuated with clashes and incidents.

It is with very great concern that, in such a situation, I have concluded that if the British condition is maintained I simply have to sacrifice the use of the ships. I cannot take the responsibility of sending these men down the Canal under present circumstances -- and that is my personal conclusion, which has nothing to do with the Egyptian stand on principle. It is in fact a curious problem because the people involved are not more than 160, and one could say that, for that reason, it is a problem which should be easy to get over. On the one side, you have the principle that a ship should serve with its crew; on the other hand, you have the specific security considerations which I have had to take into account.

It is, of course, my hope that, in the light of these explanations, and especially in the light of the fact that this is a question of what responsibility we feel we can assume and I feel I can assume -- and it is not a question of "giving in to Colonel Nasser" -- it should be possible for the British to see their way to accepting the compromise we have suggested from the beginning.

I should like to add that I would be sorry if anybody here added any kind of a sense of drama to it. It is, of course, in fact a small problem. It is just one of those things which -- in a situation which these questions involve, with feelings worked up in the way they are -- may lend itself to headline front-page publicity, as obviously happens at present in England. I am sure that you here, looking at it from the UN horizon and with the UN history in the background, can see that the problem is not of that character. It is a simple problem of comparing advantages and disadvantages, where we have incommensurable facts to put up against each other: on the one side, given the security condition, a loss of time; on the other hand, the very great risk that it gets off to a very bad start.

I would not have taken up your time even with this explanation -- because I myself regard it as in the middle of the run of the negotiations -- had it

not been for the wide publicity given this morning to Selwyn Lloyd's statement yesterday. There is no contradiction between what he said and this, apart from the fact that the United Nations argument has never been presented publicly. I have abstained from so presenting it because I did not think it would help the negotiation if we were to get drawn into any kind of public polemics. I hope we solve it without that.

Are there any questions on detail? It is already 10.30, so I think that we should not become involved in practical details, but I would like Dr. Bunche to say one word about the withdrawal question.

Dr. BUNCHE: The latest information results from a meeting between General Burns and General Dayan, which took place on Sunday, 16 December. At that time General Burns was informed by the Israel commander that, according to his instructions, the Israel forces are to be withdrawn from the Sinai Peninsula at the approximate rate of 25 kilometres per week during "the next few weeks".

There were certain specific arrangements made for this week, beginning with the withdrawal which took place this morning -- or which was supposed to take place this morning, and I assume that it did. The Israel forces withdrew to Misfaq, on the El Qantaria-El Arish road, and to Bir Gafgafa, on the Ismailia-el Auja road, and on the road from Suez to Elath. The Israelis stated that they had already withdrawn to Sudr el Heitan. With each such withdrawal the United Nations Emergency Force contingents are, of course, advancing into the area evacuated. The general rule is that they advance to within five kilometres of the new Israeli positions.

General Burns had further information from General Dayan that in the Suez Gulf coast region Israel forces are to withdraw from Sudr, where there is an important oil well installation. At about six o'clock tomorrow morning, the morning of 19 December, a UNEF detachment will promptly move forward to take over and protect the oil well installations there. And, in addition, it was understood that within a week United Nations forces may move forward approximately another 25 kilometres on roads eastward from the Canal and as far as Wadi Firham, on the Suez Gulf coast.

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A UNEF reconnaissance party is to go immediately to El Arish to obtain information regarding billeting and other requirements of the Force preparatory to its entry into El Arish.

To sum up, on the basis of the calculation made by General Martola and his military aides, if the Israel withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula is maintained at the pace and on the schedule reported to General Burns, it will take from four to six weeks before the Israel forces are, in the words of the resolution, "behind the armistice lines".

There has been no discussion as yet, and no arrangements have been presented to General Burns, with regard to the Gaza Strip or to the islands of Tiran and Sanibej in the Gulf of Aqaba.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: Our feeling is that this pace is too slow -- so slow as to create political complications which we should not have -- and we have expressed that view, of course, to the Israelis, and I hope that we may get a more satisfactory result.

Under the circumstances, I feel that a report on what Dr. Bunche has told you now before Christmas will be unavoidable, because this is not a situation that the General Assembly expected at the beginning of the recess.

Mr. MIR KHAN (Pakistan): Are they going to discuss the evacuation of the Gaza Strip? I hope it is being pressed for by General Burns.

Dr. BUNCHE: With regard to the Gaza Strip, I was about to say that that would come up for discussion with you, Mr. Secretary-General, here first of all.

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: It will come up here. You see, the line taken -- and I think it is the only possible one -- is that we maintain an unqualified and unconditional request for withdrawal. I am sure that that will leave us with some kind of residual, but I am sure that it is wise to leave the risk of residuals aside while we make the general request. And the general request, of course, runs into only one snag -- that is, the time factor -- where I do not wish to talk about rights and wrongs, but about what

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politically seems to be wise and unwise. My own feeling is that this drawn-out operation is something which cannot but have bad consequences for all our efforts to normalize relations in that part of the world. For that reason I feel that, quite apart from what was said by the Assembly, we have a perfect basis for maintenance of pressure for much more speedier evacuation than has been indicated to General Burns.

Mr. LALL (India): There is just one point, Mr. Secretary-General. This means that General Burns himself will not discuss the Gaza Strip withdrawal at present?

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: General Burns discusses the take-over, so to say, and the pushing back. The Gaza Strip problem, if and when it comes up as a separate problem, will come up at this table, but it has not been raised. We are discussing really the clean question of withdrawal or non-withdrawal.

Mr. LALL (India): I note that Dr. Bunche says nothing about the Anglo-French withdrawal. I take that to be merely because it is proceeding satisfactorily.

Dr. BUNCHE: It seems to be so. At least, that is our expectation. We have no report from General Burns to the contrary. I should say, to maintain the sense of balance, that General Burns is quite fully occupied at Port Said and Port Fuad at the moment with regard to arrangements for the full evacuation of Anglo-French forces. I say that merely to indicate that the question of Israel's withdrawal will become more acute when the Port Said evacuation is completed. There has been impediment in the sense of damaged roads and mines in Sinai, and also the problem of communications and vehicles facing General Burns.

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The SECRETARY-GENERAL: At the precise moment we can, to a certain extent, turn our back on the Port Said problem. And as I hope that we shall, at that time, have the clearing operation going, we can, of course, concentrate on the Sinai problem, which in a way is not impossible. The natural time sequence seems: withdrawal from Port Said; clearing operations started, with a safe margin over in Sinai in relation to the Israel troops; and then concentration on the tidying up of that problem.

Well, now, we have the Japanese.....

Mr. BARNARDES (Brazil): Just one question, Mr. Secretary-General. Do you have any information to impart on the possible increase of the numbers of UNEF?

The SECRETARY-GENERAL: Yes, but could we get back to that letter because it would take a little more time and I think we can devote special time to it.
