

Speeches, statements and press conference by Dag Hammar skjöld concerning Mi...

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Middle East

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Transcript of press conference by Exec.
Assist. to D.H., A. Cordier, held at U.N. H.Q.

Cordier

TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS CONFERENCE BY ANDREW W. CORDIER, EXECUTIVE
ASSISTANT TO THE SECRETARY-GENERAL, HELD AT UN HEADQUARTERS ON
FRIDAY, 4 JANUARY 1957

Mr. CORDIER: I want first of all to give you, as some of you have suggested, certain background information on the trip that Mr. Katzin and I made to Egypt at the request of the Secretary-General last week. We left here on Christmas Day and spent four days in Egypt. We went to Egypt from Naples in a UNEF plane to Abu Suweir and then directly to Port Said. In Port Said we had extensive conversations with General Wheeler and his staff on the technical arrangements and the organization of the Canal clearance operation.

The situation that had developed over the last ten days differed somewhat from the previous pattern in that it now seemed that it had become possible to use the salvage fleet in the Canal proper and for the British and French units which were already at Port Said to continue their activity in Port Said. Some days before, we had in fact sent four German ships down the Canal to El Cap, and they were waiting there for the beginning of their operations. Therefore, the arrangement that had developed during the past week was that, with the total number of ships available -- some forty of them -- our salvage fleet under the contractorship of the Dutch and Danish firms would cover the clearance in the Canal proper and the British and the French ships would cover the clearance in Port Said, under a schedule in which individual ships would phase out as their work was completed. The British and French ships would therefore be involved during this month of January on that phase-out basis, and the question of the six ships, about which there had been so much discussion until the last few days, falls out of the picture; the issue simply does not arise.

These arrangements were made with the agreement of the Egyptian authorities, and in my talk with the President of Egypt on Sunday night, he demonstrated great eagerness to get ahead with the actual clearance of the Canal. The work began at full speed before we left. General Wheeler, as you know, issued a press release which indicated that the work would be under way and that it would take place on the basis of a two-stage operation in which we hoped and planned that by early March the Canal would be cleared to a depth of twenty-five feet and that by early May it would have been cleared to its normal depth for ships of thirty-four feet draught.

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We may be able to improve upon these schedules, and I hope we can. At any rate, we shall try. The important thing in this whole operation was to get started and to start effectively, because every day of delay means a loss of some forty ship-days. Hence the great urgency of getting started, of getting the work under way, and of moving expeditiously. We will not become involved in any contest about the dates of the completion of the work. We give a general assurance with regard to the dates of early March and early May and, as I have indicated, there may be some prospect of improving on this schedule, at least in some measure.

I may say that General Wheeler himself is very much pleased with his fleet. In fact, when he saw the fleet he was delighted, and the demonstrations that have already been made of its effectiveness during the first two or three days have given him even more satisfaction. Therefore, it is a fleet that will be effective and that will perform in a very commendable way in carrying out its mission.

The agreement between the United Nations and the Egyptian Government has been initialled and will be signed as soon as the text arrives from Cairo from our own legal counsel. It will be signed by the Secretary-General and by Mr. Fawzi. The legal and technical and other arrangements have been finalized and work is under way.

Another purpose of the trip, on my side at least, was to look into the question of UNEF, to observe how it was performing and to give whatever assistance I could in whatever problems that had arisen. Again, I should like to say that UNEF is performing, I could even say, brilliantly under very great logistic difficulties, and that in its operation in Port Said and in its operation now in the desert, this Force of between 4,000 and 5,000 men is accomplishing precisely what the General Assembly wanted it to do. It is something new in world history. It is something new in the way of machinery, organization and method, and it is something which all parties had to observe in operation. The result of that observation has been positive. There is a recognition that its role is now well understood, its place in the picture is established, and its effectiveness has been obvious.

(more)

3

Note No. 1505
4 January 1957

The rather delicate change-over in Port Said was accomplished without incident, and the blue helmets really have established a sense of calm and serenity, a sense of order, which is out of proportion to the numbers involved. Therefore, as I cabled the Secretary-General while I was in Egypt, I feel that we have a right to be proud of both UNEF and the United Nations salvage and clearance efforts.

I will stop at that point. Everything I have said so far is on the record, and I now invite questions.

First of all, I should like to add that tomorrow a number of additional persons are going to the field. General Martola* and Mr. Vaughan** are going to the field on short-term missions, and they will be accompanied by a number of staff members who will be on longer assignments either with UNEF or under General Wheeler in connexion with the Suez Canal clearance arrangements. The staffing problem has been met very expeditiously by Headquarters, and we have, of course, transferred to the field a very considerable number of people. While that has been done on an ad hoc and improvised basis, I feel that it has operated, certainly from the administrative point of view, with very great smoothness and effectiveness.

QUESTION: What are the terms of the agreement between Egypt and the United Nations which you have mentioned?

Mr. CORDIER: I am not in a position to give the terms. The actual agreement will be issued as part of a General Assembly document next week. The agreement simply establishes the relationship between the Egyptian Government on the one side and the United Nations on the other. It is, in fact, simply an exchange of letters.

QUESTION: Could we know whether it is in line with Mr. Fawzi's declaration that the United Nations will be assisting Egypt and not working on its own?

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* Major General Ilmari Armas Eino Martola (Ret.), of Finland, Personal Adviser to the Secretary-General on matters relating to the UN Emergency Force

** David B. Vaughan, Under-Secretary, Director, Office of General Services

Mr. CORDIER: Well, it is in harmony with that formula.

QUESTION: You have said that the role of UNEF is now understood. Does that include its complete role, the length of time it is to stay, and at whose behest it is to leave, and so on?

Mr. CORDIER: No, I think that is a separate question. I

simply would indicate that, of course, the question of its duration is a pending question, the answer to which we ourselves do not know.

QUESTION: You said that the issue of the six British and French ships no longer arises. Does that mean that when they are finished in Port Said they will be out of the picture entirely, and that these ships will not be used anywhere in the Canal?

Mr. CORDIER: Yes, that is right. That is, the ships as a whole in Port Said harbour will be phased-out, and that includes whatever the six were.

QUESTION: Did you discuss with President Nasser the question of what is to happen in Gaza and the Straits of Aqaba, and, if so, what was the nature of those discussions?

Mr. CORDIER: No, I do not think I am in a position really to give the substance of my conversation with the President except simply to say it was very lengthy and it did cover a great number of questions. It covered questions pertinent to our work in Egypt, and I want to stop at that point.

QUESTION: When General Burns was pressing for the forward movement of his UNEF army across the Sinai, what were his command orders? How far is he to press?

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Mr. CORDIER: The pressure on the part of General Burns is based upon his official obligation to discuss the question of the withdrawal with his opposite, General Dayan. Other matters relating to the withdrawal are dealt with on the United Nations level here in New York between the Secretary-General and the Israel delegation and Government.

QUESTION: Do his command orders permit him to press right up to the armistice lines under the old United Nations armistice --

Mr. CORDIER: I don't think I have anything to add to the formula I have mentioned -- that is, that he obviously acts in response to the results that are indicated from here on the basis of consultations with the Israel delegation.

QUESTION: Does this exchange of letters or agreement that has been initialled, and that will be signed here shortly, refer only to the Suez clearance operation or **also** to the UNEF?

Mr. CORDIER: There are two agreements. One covers the Suez Canal, and the other is an agreement on the operation of UNEF.

QUESTION: They both have been initialled?

Mr. CORDIER: The other is still being discussed, but I think it will be the shortest possible time until there will be complete agreement on that also.

QUESTION: Did you discuss with Colonel Nasser the question of the resumption of an examination of the future status of the Suez Canal?

Mr. CORDIER: As I indicated a moment ago, I could not make any comment on that.

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QUESTION: Does Nasser exercise a veto over the United Nations personnel going in on either of the tasks you mentioned?

Mr. CORDIER: No, he does not.

QUESTION: Does the exchange of letters touch on the question of the cost of the operations?

Mr. CORDIER: No, it deals only with the current responsibility of the United Nations in the clearance of the Canal. The question of financing is a separate matter. The question of a permanent settlement is a separate matter. All these will have to be dealt with as separate matters, but with some degree of urgency.

QUESTION: But the understanding would be that the cleared Canal would be put at Egypt's disposal free of charge?

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Mr. CORDIER: No, I would not want to answer that question, because the question of the distribution of costs and the burden of costs is a pending question. At the moment, we are attempting to get immediate funds against charges now being made, costs now being obligated, which will be related to whatever formula is eventually established with regard to the allocation of costs. There are all sorts of divergent formulas on that point, as you know.

QUESTION: The press reported you as having had special talks with the Chief of the Israeli Division in the Egyptian Foreign Office. I should like to ask whether you discussed the question of peace negotiations with Israel in terms of the pending resolution of the United States.

Mr. CORDIER: I did not.

QUESTION: Is your answer to the previous question conditioned at all upon the presence or the absence of Israeli troops from any part of the territory they seized --

Mr. CORDIER: No; quite contrary to certain speculation in the press, the Egyptian Government definitely did not relate the question of Israeli withdrawal to the question of the initiation of the clearance of the Canal.

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QUESTION: How long does UNEF stay in the Canal Zone?

Mr. CORDIER: UNEF's purpose in being in the Canal Zone was, of course, to facilitate the withdrawal of the British-French troops and to ensure peaceful conditions. That was its primary purpose. That purpose has been accomplished. There are minor units, very small units, remaining in Port Said. There will be a shift out of that area in due course; I cannot be sure how soon.

QUESTION: In the very near future?

Mr. CORDIER: I would not say whether it is the very near future or a slightly more remote future.

QUESTION: Will you elaborate a little more your statement that there is no veto by Nasser?

Mr. CORDIER: The point of the question was whether he was vetoing the entry of United Nations personnel into Egypt, and my answer was "No".

QUESTION: Do you and the Secretary-General feel -- I am trying to get a sort of personal reaction -- that things are going well, that they are progressing?

Mr. CORDIER: We are very satisfied. Very much hard work remains to be done, but we are satisfied.

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QUESTION: You said that Nasser did not stipulate any connexion between Gaza and the Canal?

Mr. CORDIER: I said that the Egyptian Government did not.

QUESTION: Does that mean the clearance of the Canal or the opening of the Canal?

Mr. CORDIER: The point is that the issue as expressed in the press was that the reason for the delay in the initiation of the clearance of the Canal was possibly -- some people dropped the word "possibly" -- due to the fact that the Egyptian Government related the question of the slowness of Israeli withdrawal to that question, and I was simply saying that that was not true.

QUESTION: That was not speculation; that was a statement by the Director of the Egyptian Ministry of Information, who was quoted by name from Cairo.

Mr. CORDIER: I am simply indicating that it is not true.

QUESTION: He never made that statement?

Mr. CORDIER: I didn't ask him, I didn't see him -- but I say that the Egyptian Government states that it was not true.

QUESTION: What was the reason for the delay?

Mr. CORDIER: I do not think it needs to be elaborated very much. There were very many technical problems that arose in connexion with the operation. There was the question of the six ships for a period of time, which held up the operation. It was our hope that the clearance could start soon after the British-French withdrawal. The British-French withdrawal took place on 21 December. The clearance of the Canal actually got under way about ten days later.

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QUESTION: Did you discuss the long-range question of a Suez settlement?

Mr. CORDIER: We covered a very large amount of ground, yes.

QUESTION: Were the Straits of Aqaba touched on at all in your discussions?

Mr. CORDIER: I would not want to comment upon that.

QUESTION: What is your and the Secretary-General's view with respect to what should happen in Gaza and the Straits of Aqaba?

Mr. CORDIER: First of all, we are under an obligation to implement the Assembly resolution, which seems clear on that point.

QUESTION: Is that the end of your comment?

Mr. CORDIER: That is the end of it, yes.

QUESTION: What happens after that?

Mr. CORDIER: Our obligation is very clear: I would simply put it that way. It is not for us to engage in speculation as to what the Assembly might do in the future.

QUESTION: You do not feel you have any obligation beyond that?

Mr. CORDIER: Well, that is a very considerable obligation.

QUESTION: You said something about two members of the Secretariat going out there tomorrow -- Dave Vaughan and somebody else --

Mr. CORDIER: The other one is General Martola, who is the military adviser to the Secretary-General.

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QUESTION: Could you expatiate a bit on what they are going to do?

Mr. CORDIER: General Martola is engaged wholly on the UNEF side and therefore will devote his entire attention to consultation with General Burns on questions relating to UNEF. Mr. Vaughan will be dealing wholly with questions of administration, whether with UNEF or with Suez Canal clearance questions -- that is, General Wheeler's administrative questions, as a matter of fact.

QUESTION: You were there, I think, when the story broke on the new United States policy. Did you have a feeling that there was a sense of increased tension and fear of war?

Mr. CORDIER: No, I would not want to make any comment whatsoever on that.

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