

'Closing of Aqaba a New, Grave Dimension to Crisis' - LBJ

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The Wall Street Journal warned editorially Wednesday that while the United States "apparently is still committed to oppose aggression in the Middle East," in view of its heavy commitments and pledges elsewhere "it had better be pretty cautious about interpreting the pledge." The newspaper said the United States has "legitimate interests" in the Middle East and an interest in peace keeping there. "So any uses of American diplomacy to prevent that war would be very much in order," it asserted. "Beyond that, it stressed, 'we believe the United States should not go, and we hope the policy makers in Washington are of the same opinion.'"

The nature of the conflict, the paper said, "is simply not such as to warrant the military attention of this country." It is one thing to oppose communism abroad, it added, since communism represented a danger to the United States. But "while the Soviets have long been making trouble in the Middle East, an Arab-Israeli war, if it comes, does not constitute a substantial threat to American security."

JOHNSON STATEMENT

President Johnson, in a statement urging action by the United Nations Security Council, Tuesday said free passage in the Gulf of Aqaba is a "vital interest of the international community" and the United States "feels a blockade of Israeli shipping is illegal and potentially disastrous to the cause of peace." (It was later confirmed that Egypt had mined the entrance to the gulf.)

President Johnson focused attention on what he describes as "three potentially explosive aspects of the present confrontation":

"First, we regret that the general armistice agreements have failed to prevent warlike acts from the territory of one against another government, or against civilians, or territory, under control of another government.

"Second, we are dismayed at the hurried withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force from Gaza and Sinai after more than 10 years of steadfast and effective service in keeping the peace, without action by either the General Assembly or the Security Council. We continue to regard the presence of the UN in the area as a matter of fundamental importance and shall support its continuance with all possible vigor.

"Third, we deplore the recent build-up of military forces and believe it a matter of urgent importance to reduce troop concentrations. The status of sensitive areas, as the secretary-general emphasized in his report to the Security Council, such as the Gaza Strip and the Gulf of Aqaba, is a particularly important aspect of the situation.

"In this connection, I want to add that the purported closing of the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping has brought a new and grave dimension to the crisis. The United States considers the gulf to be an international waterway and feels that a blockade of Israeli shipping is illegal and potentially disastrous to the cause of peace. The right of free, innocent passage of the international waterway is a vital interest of the international community.

"The government of the United States is seeking clarification on this point. We have urged Secretary-General Thant to recognize the sensitivity of the Aqaba question and to give it the highest priority in his discussions in Cairo."

The President added that "to the leaders of all the nations of the Near East, I wish to say what three Presidents have said before — that the United States is firmly committed to the support of the political independence and territorial integrity of all nations of the area. The United

States strongly opposes aggression by anyone in the area, in any form, overt or clandestine. This has been the policy of the United States led by four Presidents — President Truman, President Eisenhower, President Kennedy and myself—as well as the policy of both of our political parties. The record of the actions of the United States over the past 20 years, within and outside of the UN, is very clear on this point.

"The United States has consistently sought to have good relations with all the states of the Near East. Regrettably this has not always been possible, but we are convinced that our differences with each other must be worked out peacefully and in accordance with accepted international practice. We have always opposed—and we oppose in other parts of the world at this moment—the efforts of other nations to resolve their problems with their neighbors by aggression. We shall continue to do so. And we appeal to all other peace-loving nations to do likewise.

"We call upon all concerned to observe in a spirit of restraint their solemn responsibilities under the charter of the United Nations and the general armistice agreements. These provide an honorable means of preventing hostilities until, through the efforts of the international community, a peace with justice and honor can be achieved. I have been in close contact, and will be in the days ahead with Ambassador Goldberg at the UN, where we are pursuing the matter with great vigor and hope the Security Council can act effectively."

After paying a visit to Expo '67 Thursday, President Johnson conferred with Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson on the Middle East question.

It was reported by official sources that the administration was seeking a "Tashkent formula" in which the Arab-Israeli conflict would be regarded in the same sense that Washington saw the recent Pakistani-Indian outbreak. The United States would immediately cancel arms shipments to Israel and any Arab state involved in the fighting. Washington would then hope that the Soviet Union would use its influence with the Arabs to bring about a willingness to disengage.

'TASHKENT FORMULA'

Chairman J. W. Fulbright of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee said following the appearance of Secretary of State Rusk before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, that Russia had a "great opportunity" to display devotion to peace by working with the Arabs and Israelis for a solution "even more spectacular than their success in mediating the war between India and Pakistan at the Tashkent Conference." He said the Russians were "widely commended" for the Tashkent formula and he hoped that such efforts might now be exerted to preserve Middle Eastern peace.

Another member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sen. Stuart Symington, Missouri Democrat, said he was not reassured that America can defend both the Middle East and the Far East — emphasizing that "the Middle East is more important to the security of the United States than in the Far East." He said it was an international responsibility to keep open the Gulf of Aqaba.

Administration sources, declining to be quoted, said that the White House was surprised by the speed of U Thant's capitulation to President Nasser's demand. It was interpreted as an Afro-Asia rebuff to President Johnson's policies in Vietnam. The United States had urged U Thant to stall on removal of UNEF until the situation could be cooled off. A personal appeal was reportedly made to U Thant. The sources said that they especially regretted the rapid UNEF withdrawal because the United

States had counted on the UN to keep peace in the area, since America, because of its ties with Jordan and Saudi Arabia, could not afford to become unilaterally linked with Israel's defense.

Chairman John Stennis of the Senate Preparedness subcommittee said Wednesday that the United States must "by no means" go it States must "by no means" go it Israel because of commitments in Vietnam. He said that Israel should apply to the UN and that America should seek an international formula while avoiding unilateral involvement. Sen. Stennis is a Mississippi Democrat and leading opponent of civil rights legislation.

The United States and Canada voiced eloquent pleas to the Security Council Wednesday urging that the 15-member body deal immediately with the dangerous situation in the Middle East.

However, opposition to the very convening of a Security Council session at this time on the Middle East issue was expressed by Dr. Nikolai Fedorenko, Soviet representative; Roger Seydoux, the French ambassador; and the representatives of Bulgaria, India and Mali.

Just before the session was opened, it became known that Israel and Egypt both requested that they be seated at the council table during the current session.

Dr. Fedorenko declared that the very convening of the meeting posed a danger to world peace. He charged that the two council members who had requested a meeting, Canada and Denmark, were only acting as a front for NATO powers and for other Western interests whose real concern, he said, lies with "a desire to interfere in the affairs of other nations rather than with peace in the Middle East."

WARNING BY GOLDBERG

Dr. Fedorenko said that the convening of the council in urgent session Wednesday was "an exaggerated effort and an attempt by some of the Western representatives to dramatize a situation which is really not of their concern."

Later in reply to those who opposed the council meeting, Ambassador Arthur J. Goldberg, chief envoy of the United States here, told the body:

"This council would have to be burying its head in the sands if it refused to recognize that, since the secretary general left here for Cairo two days ago, there have been dire and dangerous developments which were not known to him at that time or known, indeed to any member of the council. The situation now is of central concern to the world, a tragedy that potentially threatens the peace of the entire Middle East region and all of mankind."

Both of the initial sponsors of the call for Wednesday's session, Canada's ambassador, George Ignatieff, and Denmark's ambassador, Hans Tabor, requested that the council take actions to help pacify the situation in the Middle East.

"In calling this Security Council meeting," said Ignatieff, "we are suggesting that this council should exercise its responsibilities under the charter to deal with the kind of threatening situation which the secretary general has not only reported to the Security Council, but has regarded as sufficiently serious to assume the responsibility for undertaking a personal mission to the area."

Ambassador Ignatieff referred to the situation along the Israel-Arab borders by pointing out that there have been steady reports of deterioration along the frontier lines between Syria and Israel.

(It was reported from Cairo that Wednesday night, an Israeli patrol had a minor skirmish with Arabs at the border, but were forced to withdraw. The report said there were no casualties.)

CITES DANGER

Ambassador Ignatieff noted that Lt. Gen. Odd Bull, chief of staff of the United Nations Truce Super-

vision Organization, has been unable thus far to bring about resumption of the extraordinary session of the Israel-Syrian Mixed Armistice Commission.

He referred to statements made recently both by President Nasser of Egypt and Israel's Prime Minister Levi Eshkol "which faced us with the possibility of the danger of direct confrontation between the United Arab Republic and Israel over the question of access to the Gulf of Aqaba."

After telling the council that its principal means for balancing the deteriorating situation lay in full support to Thant's mission, he said: "I believe at this stage, the most useful contribution which this council can make is to reinforce the current efforts being made by the secretary general to preserve peace in the area. This is the purpose of what we are suggesting that the council should do. We should, at the same time, urge that no member state of the United Nations take any action which would either prejudice the success of the secretary general's mission or worsen the situation."

He was obviously hinting at talks with the Soviet bloc, the Arab bloc and Israel when he said: "I must stress that we are willing to consult with all our colleagues as well as with the countries most directly concerned to try to find agreements which will reverse the drift toward the worsening of confrontation which now exists and which has been drawn to our attention in so dramatic a way by the secretary general and by his mission."

In his remarks, Seydoux of France told the council that his delegation had not been consulted about the "hasty" summoning of the council.

Officials of the French government had said earlier that France had no plans at present to abide by the 1950 Tripartite Declaration which France, the United States and Britain had issued, guaranteeing the territorial integrity of all the Arab-Israeli borders.

Instead of relying on the Tripartite Declaration, the French officials were quoted as saying that France hopes that the United Nations would safeguard the peace in the Near East.

THANT DISTURBED

Secretary-General Thant was reported to have been "highly disturbed" at the convening of the Security Council session during his absence. Thant returned to New York Thursday, cutting short his mission to Cairo.

Thant and Nasser conferred for three hours on the conflict after a warning from the United States that it would use force if necessary to keep the Gulf of Aqaba open to international shipping. Thant envisioned a peace formula based on the creation of a revamped Egyptian-Israeli armistice commission.

The commission would be under UN supervision and would be similar to the one dissolved in 1956 following Israel's refusal to participate.

Egypt's first reaction to a suggestion by French President Charles de Gaulle for concerted efforts by France, the United States, Britain and Russia to resolve the crisis was "not favorable." The U. S. supported the move.

The Soviet Union, at UN headquarters, suggested the United States and Britain withdraw their warships from the Mediterranean as a first step toward reducing tension.

In talks with the United States foreign minister, Russia has reportedly linked the Middle East crisis with Vietnam in a package deal.

Israel received the Soviet declaration of full support for the Arab states made Tuesday in Moscow calmly and without surprise. Israelis said that the Soviet Union's attitude had been suspected from the very beginning of the crisis. The only note of surprise sounded by Israelis was over the rapidity

with which the Moscow position was made public and the violence of its tone.

"MILITARY PSYCHOSIS"

The Soviet statement distributed by the Tass agency belabored Israel for "aggravating the atmosphere of military psychosis," affirmed that maintenance of peace and security in the Middle East "accords with the vital interests of the peoples of the Soviet Union" and warned bluntly that "He who would venture to unleash aggression would encounter not only the united strength of the Arab countries but also resolute resistance to aggression on the part of the Soviet Union and all peace-loving states."

The Soviet declaration was seen here as confirmation that Nasser's general offensive was known to Moscow long in advance and the possibility was weighed here that it might have been concerted by the two countries during the recent visit to Cairo of Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei T. Gromyko. Gromyko had a number of secret meetings with Nasser at the time.

(In an ironic twist, Communist China issued a statement that Peking supports the Arabs against Israel, which was termed "a tool of the imperialists." Peking took a line that the Arabs must guard against betrayal by a Soviet agreement with the West.)

Most Israelis agreed that Tuesday was the longest day since the current crisis erupted and was a particularly grueling one in the foreign ministry.

Foreign Minister Abba S. Eban received individually the envoys of most of the Eastern European countries to each of whom he explained the Israeli position and declared that Israel, in accordance

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with Article 51 of the United Nations charter, reserved the right of self-defense in the event that Nasser imposed a blockade on the Straits of Tiran.

Eban was also in close touch throughout the day with the embassies of the Western countries. Instructions went out from the foreign ministry to all Israeli envoys abroad to explain to the governments to which they were accredited that Israel intended to adhere to its policy on international waterways as described by Golda Meir, then the foreign minister, addressing the United Nations General Assembly in March 1957. This policy, it was stressed, was approved by the 14 maritime nations which were represented in the Geneva Conference on the International Law of the Sea.

POLITICAL ACTION

As on the diplomatic front, there was intense activity on Israel's political scene with increasing talk of formation of a "cabinet of national unity" embracing all parties except the Communists and a tiny splinter group.

Spokesmen for the government coalition brushed aside these reports as "grossly premature," but observers noted that the government was seeking to associate the opposition parties more closely to its formulation and application of policy. Prime Minister Levi Eshkol's meeting Tuesday with all the parties was described as the first of such sessions, and Eshkol apparently planned to hold them as frequently as the situation demands.

Only one party, the United Workers Party (Rafi) had thus far come out against the government line, but later it, too, acceded. In Wednesday's edition of the party's weekly organ, New Outlook, former Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's group asserted that Prime Minister Eshkol had only two possible choices now: To accept a "Munich" with all its implications, or take the action demanded by circumstances.

The Rafi organ also hinted at the need for establishing a gov- (Continued on Page 17)