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SIC TEL NO 261

TO IMMEDIATE FCO

TELEGRAM NUMBER 261 OF 4 MAY 1981

INFO GUATEMALA CITY WASHINGTON UKMIS NEW YORK AND MEXICO CITY

*Belize*  
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TALKS IN BELIZE.

1. WE HAVE HAD A GRUELLING DAY. AFTER THOROUGH TALKS WITH THE GOVERNOR, HIS STAFF AND THE COMMISSIONER OF POLICE, MR RIDLEY WAS JOINED FOR A WORKING LUNCH BY PRICE, ROGERS AND COURTENAY..
2. ON A REFERENDUM, PRICE HAS ALREADY PUBLISHED ONE WEEK AGO (NO DOUBT TO PREEMPT MR RIDLEY'S ORIGINAL PROGRAMME) A COMMENTARY ON THE HEADS OF AGREEMENT WHICH CONTAINS A SPECIFIC OFFER OF A REFERENDUM BEFORE SIGNATURE OF ANY TREATY NEGOTIATED WITH GUATEMALA. IT IS AN OBJECTIONABLE DOCUMENT BUT COULD NOT NOW BE RECALLED (SEE FOLLOWING TELEGRAM). PRICE IS THUS NOW FULLY COMMITTED TO A REFERENDUM AND MR RIDLEY HAS HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO ACKNOWLEDGE THIS, PRESENTING THE DECISION AS PRICES'S ALONE, AND REFUSING DETAILED COMMENT. PRICE CLEARLY BELIEVES THAT IF HE WINS A REFERENDUM ON A TREATY, WELL AND GOOD. IF HE LOST, HE WOULD REJECT THE TREATY, NEVERTHELESS EXPECTING TO PROCEED TO INDEPENDENCE WITHOUT AN AGREEMENT AND WITH A BRITISH GUARANTEE NOT TO WITHDRAW THE GARRISON. HE REFUSED TO COUNTENANCE A REFERENDUM ON THE ISSUE OF INDEPENDENCE CLAIMING UNCONVINCINGLY THAT A VOTE ON A TREATY AND INDEPENDENCE PACKAGE WOULD ENHANCE OPPOSITION CHANCES OF SUCCESSFULLY OBTAINING A 'NO' VOTE IN THE REFERENDUM..
3. PRICE PRESSED HARD FOR IMMEDIATE ANNOUNCEMENT OF 21 SEPTEMBER AS THE FIRM DATE FOR INDEPENDENCE, REJECTING THE VIEW THAT SUCH TIMING WOULD BE PREMATURE, GIVEN THE RISK OF RENEWED DISTURBANCES IN BELIZE AND ALMOST CERTAINLY ADVERSE GUATEMALAN REACTION WITH RESULTANT PREJUDICE TO THE NEGOTIATIONS. HE TRIED TO MAKE HIS ATTENDANCE AT MEETING WITH CASTILLO VALDEZ ON 8 MAY CONDITIONAL UPON PRIOR ANNOUNCEMENT OF INDEPENDENCE DATE. HE RECEIVED NO COMFORT ON THIS AND IS NOW CONSIDERING HIS POSITION, BUT HAS NOT YET UNDERTAKEN TO COME TO WASHINGTON.
4. MR RIDLEY POINTED OUT

(1) THAT NEGOTIATION OF A TREATY STILL REPRESENTED MUCH THE BEST OPTION FOR INDEPENDENT BELIZE'S FUTURE AS A NEIGHBOUR OF GUATEMALA.

(11) IT WOULD BE FOLLY TO JEOPARDISE THE CHANCES OF AN AGREEMENT BEFORE THE MATTER HAD BEEN DISCUSSED WITH THE GUATEMALANS AND WITH OPPOSITION GROUPS IN BELIZE. FLEXIBILITY NEED NOT MEAN DELAY.

(111) NO BRITISH GOVERNMENT COULD ALLOW PRICE TO REJECT A REASONABLE SETTLEMENT IN THE LIGHT OF AN ADVERSE REFERENDUM RESULT AND THEN PROPOSE TO PARLIAMENT EARLY INDEPENDENCE WITH A BRITISH GARRISON TO STAY ON TO DEFEND BELIZE. PRICE COUNTERED THIS BY POINTING TO THE STRENGTH OF INTERNATIONAL OPINION IN FAVOUR OF INDEPENDENCE THIS YEAR. THROUGHOUT THIS CONVERSATION, WHICH IS TO BE CONTINUED TOMORROW, PRICE AND HIS COLLEAGUES PORTRAYED THE OPPOSITION AS WRECKERS, OUT FOR IMMEDIATE POLITICAL ADVANTAGE, AND IN FAVOUR OF

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FURTHER VIOLENCE. HE WANTED THE STATE OF EMERGENCY TO REMAIN IN FORCE TO ASSIST HIM IN HIS DETERMINATION TO MUZZLE THE OPPOSITION. HE IS ALSO MISTRUSTFUL AND BITTER ABOUT PSU SUPPORT FOR OPPOSITION VIEWPOINTS.

5. MR RIDLEY THEN PROCEEDED TO TWO CONFUSED AND OFTEN EMOTIONAL LARGE MEETINGS OF OPPOSITION GROUPS, WHICH INCLUDED MAYORAL DELEGATIONS FROM ALL PARTS OF BELIZE AND MEMBERS OF THE YPF AND BAM YOUTH WINGS. THE MAIN PREOCCUPATIONS WHICH AROSE WERE -

(1) THERE IS WIDESPREAD MISTRUST OF PRICE, HIS MOTIVES AND STYLE OF GOVERNMENT.

(11) OPPOSITION TO THE HEADS OF AGREEMENT IS MOTIVATED BOTH BY POLITICAL DESIRE TO EMBARRASS PRICE AND BY GENUINE BUT MAINLY INSTIC

TIVE FEAR OF GUATEMALA.

(111) A MAJOR IRRITANT IS THE DOMINATION BY THE PUP OF RADIO BELIZE.

(1V) THERE IS STRONG SUSPICION THAT PRICE IS USING THE STATE OF EMERGENCY TO SUPPRESS DISSENT ON THE HEADS OF AGREEMENT.

(V) THERE IS WIDESPREAD AND BASIC MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE HEADS OF AGREEMENT.

(V1) NEVERTHELESS, THERE IS BI-PARTISAN DESIRE FOR EARLY INDEPENDENCE.

(V11) MANY OF THE SAFEGUARDS OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONFERENCE REPORT ARE EITHER UNKNOWN OR IGNORED IN BELIZE.

6. THERE WAS UTTERANCE OF SOME UGLY THREATS OF MORE VIOLENCE FROM THE YOUNGER BAM REPRESENTATIVES, BUT THE DISCUSSION HAS GIVEN OPPORTUNITY TO MANY OPPOSITION MEMBERS TO BLOW OFF STEAM.

7. IN A LATE EVENING MEETING WITH ARANDA, HE SHOWED WILLINGNESS TO REFLECT AND HINTED AT FLEXIBILITY OVER UDP ATTENDANCE AT 20 MAY NEGOTIATIONS. DETAILS IN TOMORROW'S TELEGRAM.

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