

YEMEN - INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION IN EVACUATION
ROYAL YACHT BRITANNIA*

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Sir Geoffrey Howe): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the action being taken to secure the safety of British subjects and others in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.

On 13 January fighting broke out in Aden. The ferocity of the fighting presented grave risks to the safety of British subjects. In those circumstances, and with the full agreement of Her Majesty the Queen, the royal yacht Britannia, which was just leaving the Red sea, was ordered to remain off Aden, and Her Majesty's ships Newcastle and Jupiter, with the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Brambleleaf, were ordered to Aden at full steam in case they were needed for an evacuation.

The situation in the country continued to deteriorate and the level of fighting approached that of a civil war. After close consultation with the Russians and French, both in Aden and in capitals, it was agreed that evacuation was necessary and that, as far as possible, our efforts should be co-ordinated. On 17 January, Soviet merchant vessels lifted off from Aden about 1,000 people, mostly their own nationals. On the same day, the royal yacht took off 450 people, 38 of them British—44 nationalities altogether. Eighty-one French nationals were then transferred to a French ship, and the rest of the evacuees were taken on Britannia to Djibouti. The royal yacht then returned to the area and on 19 January lifted off a further 209 people from an area 35 miles from the capital. Eighteen of these were British. These have since arrived in Djibouti, after transferring to HMS Jupiter. I am now very pleased to be able to add that Britannia has this morning picked up a further 15 British nationals from Little Aden. Britannia is maintaining close contact with the vessels of the other nations involved, and remains offshore nearby to take on board further parties of British and other foreign nationals as soon as conditions permit.

So far, no British subjects have been hurt. However, a number of British subjects still remain in south Yemen and we are continuing to work out with other Governments the best ways of evacuating these widely scattered communities.

On the evening of 17 January, when the embassy and residence had been rendered uninhabitable, the ambassador, Mr. Arthur Marshall, decided that he should withdraw all members of the embassy. At the end of the evacuation, he accompanied those on board to Djibouti but then returned on Britannia to the area, where he will remain with a member of his staff while the evacuation continues. Another member of his staff is on board HMS Newcastle.

The success of the evacuation so far would not have been possible without the help given by a number of Governments, and in particular the Governments of Djibouti, the USSR and France. This has been a remarkable demonstration of what can be achieved through close international co-operation, and I take this opportunity to thank them warmly for their assistance.

I should like to express my gratitude to all the staff of the Ministry of Defence and of the Diplomatic Service, at home and abroad, who have been involved in this operation. I should particularly like to thank our honorary consul in Djibouti, Mr. Christopher Reddington. I know too that the whole House will join me in praising the calmness and efficiency of our ambassador in Aden, his staff, and their families throughout this difficult period.

Their example has been matched by the fortitude of the British evacuees, who helped to organise the evacuation of hundreds of other nationals and who set an example of disciplined behaviour throughout.

This is the first time that the royal yacht has been involved in a operation of this sort. It has received magnificent support from HM ships Newcastle and Jupiter, and Royal Fleet Auxiliary Brambleleaf, with its Merchant Navy crew. I should like to pay tribute to Rear Admiral John Garnier and all the officers and crew involved for the courage and professionalism that they have shown in carrying out the operation in conditions of danger and difficulty. We can all be proud of them.

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* [This is an extract from Hansard, House of Commons; 21 January 1986, pp 185,186 The extract was provided by the Information Service of the British High Commission, Canberra].

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East):

I ask the Foreign Secretary to report to the House in specific respects. Was the matter of the rescue raised in his discussions yesterday with Mr. Ryzhov, the Soviet Deputy Minister? On the best estimates available to him, how many Britons remain in South Yemen? Can he say how long it is expected that the royal yacht Britannia will remain close by and available for action? What is the Foreign Office reading of the position regarding who is in charge in South Yemen? Is it the Foreign Office view that the difference between the factions there is essentially on ideological lines, or is it more based on personal and tribal factors?

Finally, are there any anxieties about the troubles in South Yemen spilling over into neighbouring territories, and possibly posing a threat to security in the region as a whole?

Sir Geoffrey Howe: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the kind way in which he has joined me in paying tribute to all those involved in the operation, and add my word of thanks to my hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Armed Forces for his support throughout.

The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the degree of co-operation between the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union on this occasion. One cannot presume from that high degree of co-operation that everything else will be handled in the same spirit, but I hope that it will not be the last occasion for improving relationships in this way. I was able to raise the matter with Mr. Ryzhov last night, to thank him for the co-operation that had taken place, and to express the hope that it would continue in practical terms on the spot. It is worth reminding the House of what Admiral Garnier said this morning when he paid tribute to the fine atmosphere of international co-operation. He said that

"the French, the Soviets and us are talking regularly, pooling our information, and everyone here is dedicated to the hope that we can get the remaining people off."

The hon. Gentleman asked precisely the questions which one would want to ask. It is not possible to be sure about the number of British subjects still left in the PDRY, but our inquiries suggest that the figure is likely to be about 40. Her Majesty has expressed her willingness for Britannia to remain for as long as there is a need for it to do so.

It is not possible for me to offer any clear view on the outcome, because the situation is still very confusing, but it appears that the conflict arises from differences of a tribal kind rather than a political or ideological kind. So far, the problems have not spilt over into other neighbouring countries. If they did, it would naturally be a cause for concern. We are keeping in close touch with all those countries in the neighbourhood.