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Argentina Initiates Negotiations on Malvinas Conflict via Washington

by LADB Staff
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Highlights of recent developments surrounding the conflict between Britain and Argentina regarding the Malvinas (Falklands) islands are summarized below. Feb. 5: At a meeting with Venezuelan politicians in Caracas, Chairman of the Argentine Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, Adolfo Gass, said the Malvinas problem is a Latin American issue since the outcome of the present conflict with Britain will have repercussions throughout the continent.

The Radical Civic Union senator said the Argentine government seeks to maintain peace in the area. Thus, Buenos Aires is intent on preventing military incidents in the South Atlantic. This attitude, he said, does not mean the Alfonsin government would back down from "strongly defending the sovereignty of the seas which belong to us in keeping with international law."

Gass stated that any vessel lacking authorization by Argentine authorities to fish in the area will be intercepted and its fish catch confiscated. He asserted that although Buenos Aires has received the support of Latin American and Non-Aligned countries, as well as certain Western European nations, Britain refuses to negotiate with Argentina. London, he added, will be obligated to negotiate "sooner or later" due to pressure from "civilized countries."

Next, the senator said his government is confident the British government will not dispatch warships to "protect" the economic zone surrounding the islands claimed by London. He added Buenos Aires is not willing to launch a new military confrontation. "We are a peaceful country, and we also know our own limitations. We are not a military power." In an interview with Cuban news agency PrensA Latina, Labor Party MP Robert N. Wareing said Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher intends to exploit the Malvinas (Falklands) issue toward improving her chances in the upcoming elections.

According to the Liverpool MP, the establishment of an exclusive fishing zone surrounding the Malvinas is a move to fuel the fires of nationalism among British voters, i.e., a reenactment of Thatcher's 1983 tactics following the war with Argentina. However, said Wareing, the present situation is different from 1983, when the Conservative Party was successful in reviving "old and outdated arguments related to Great Britain's imperial past." In brief, Thatcher will not be able this time to divert attention from important domestic issues such as high unemployment and the budget deficit.

The Labour MP emphasized that the conflict in the South Atlantic must be resolved via negotiations between the two nations. He praised what he described as the Argentine government's common sense, which makes bilateral contacts possible. Wareing asserted that while British citizens are not indifferent to the situation in the South Atlantic, they will not permit it to become a major issue in...
the elections. He said the Conservative desire to exploit the issue as a demonstration of that party's "firmness," in contrast to Labourite "weakness" simply will not work this time around.

Feb. 6: The governments of Argentina and Britain assumed diametrically opposed positions on the existence of secret negotiations via Washington on the conflict surrounding the Malvinas (Falklands) islands. In London a spokesperson for the Foreign Office affirmed that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's government had received an Argentine proposal and that a response had been issued.

Meanwhile, in Buenos Aires an official spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry denied the ministry had initiated direct contacts between the two governments and reiterated the terms of an official communique released Feb. 5 which asserted that the Argentine government would not consider bilateral negotiations unless sovereignty over the islands was included on the agenda.

The spokesperson said rumors of bilateral negotiations were simply false. For the past month, the Argentine news media has suggested the existence of secret negotiations, a rumor repeatedly denied by the Alfonsin government. The Foreign Office spokesperson said the proposal by Buenos Aires was presented over two weeks ago and did not mention the issue of sovereignty, focusing instead on mechanisms to avoid incidents in the South Atlantic. Such incidents may develop in terms of conflicting claims to fishing rights by British, Argentine and third country vessels.

The spokesperson claimed London was currently waiting on a response to its reply to Buenos Aires' initiative. The content of the announcement by the Foreign Office was echoed by British opposition parties. George Foulkes, spokesperson for Labor Party's international affairs department said the initiative was Argentine, and that it proposed negotiations without alluding to sovereignty of the islands. He said the initiative constituted proof that the Alfonsin government's sincere desire for serious discussion toward arriving at a long-term agreement. Conservative MP Cyril Townsend head of the South Atlantic Council, an association which favors a rapprochement between the two countries on the Malvinas conflict expressed his satisfaction for the "exchange of ideas" which began in recent weeks. He underlined the necessity of greater cooperation with the democratic Argentine government, and the elimination of tensions in the South Atlantic.

Certain morning editions of London dailies reported on alleged contacts between the two governments via Washington as intermediary. British Foreign Ministry spokespersons said contacts with Argentina are only exploratory, and that the issue of sovereignty over the islands will not be included in any eventual negotiations. Feb. 7: The Argentine Foreign Ministry again denied it had secretly initiated direct contacts with the British government, reiterating that such negotiations will be contemplated only when London agrees to discuss the sovereignty of the Malvinas islands. The Ministry was responding to the Feb. 6 statement by a British Foreign Office spokesman who asserted Argentina had initiated a proposal aimed at avoiding military incidents in the South Atlantic.

Ministry spokespersons stated that while the government of President Raul Alfonsin wished to avoid incidents in the area, this does not mean a proposal for negotiations was forwarded to Britain. Feb. 8: Argentine Foreign Minister Dante Caputo announced he would deliver a report this week to the Senate on "rumors of third country involvement" in the Malvinas problem. Official sources apparently admitted the existence of secret contacts between Argentine and British officials via the
Reagan administration as intermediary. This admission, which reportedly "shocked" Argentine public opinion, resulted in a request by the Senate Defense Committee that the Foreign Ministry provide "details" on the issue. Intransigent Party Deputy Miguel Monserat told reporters an "ally of colonialism" should not be involved in dealings with Britain.

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