

The Arab-Israel Crisis.- U.N. Emergency Force withdrawn from Sinai and Gaza Strip on Egyptian Demand. - Egyptian Blockade of Gulf of Aqaba. - Israeli Vessels banned from entering Gulf. - Mobilization in Arab Countries and Israel. - Arab and Soviet Support for Egypt. - U Thant's Mission to Cairo. -International Reactions to Middle East Crisis.

The long-standing tension in the Middle East erupted on June 5 in the outbreak of war between Israel and the Arab States, each side accusing the other of responsibility for the commencement of hostilities. As stated in 22062 A and 21817 A, there had been constantly increasing tension on Israel's frontiers since the autumn of 1966 due to the stepping-up of attacks by Arab terrorist organizations, directed in the great majority of cases from Syrian territory.

The frequency and intensification of these terrorist attacks, for which the Syrian Government expressed its full support and which the Israeli Government alleged had all been organized by Syria, had led to repeated warnings to Syria by Israeli leaders. As stated in 22062 A, the Israeli Chief of Staff (Major-General Rabin) declared on March 24 that, if these attacks continued, it might become necessary "to take action against the country from which these infiltrators come." On May 10, according to a report in *Le Monde*, the Foreign Minister of Israel (Mr. Eban) had instructed the Israeli ambassadors accredited to the countries represented on the Security Council to bring the gravity of the Syro-Israeli frontier situation to the attention of those countries, and to inform them that Israel could not remain inactive in the face of constant aggressions against her territory by Arabs coming from Syria and enjoying the support of the Syrian authorities. Speaking on May 14 at the Israel Independence Day celebrations, Mr. Eshkol (Prime Minister of Israel) said that a serious confrontation with Syria would be inevitable if the terrorist campaign carried on by Arab infiltrators acting under Syrian orders continued.

Among major developments in the Middle East in the three weeks before the outbreak of hostilities on June 5 were the withdrawal from the Egyptian-Israeli frontier of the U.N. Emergency Force in the Middle East (UNEF), at the demand of the U.A.R. Government; an Egyptian blockade of the Straits of Tiran, at the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba, thereby denying passage to shipping proceeding to the Israeli port of Eilat at the head of the Gulf; and the conclusion of a defence pact between the U.A.R. and Jordan, signed in Cairo by President Nasser and King Hussein. Developments since the middle of May are described below chronologically.

A state of emergency was proclaimed throughout Egypt on May 16, a Cairo broadcast saying that all military forces were "in a complete state of preparedness for war." In Syria, similarly, it was announced that all the country's armed forces had been alerted and that tanks and artillery were moving into "defensive positions" on the frontier with Israel. It was disclosed the same day

in Cairo and Damascus that Lieut.General Mohammed Fawzi, the U.A.R. Chief of Staff, and senior Egyptian officers had been conferring in the Syrian capital for three days on the implementation of the U.A.R.Syrian defence pact signed in November las [see 21710 C] .

Further statements were made in Cairo and Damascus on May 17 announcing that both the U.A.R. and Syria were in “combat readiness” and alleging a strong Israeli military build-up on the borders of both countries. Press reports from Middle East capitals spoke of movements of strong Egyptian armoured forces eastward across the Sinai peninsula towards the frontier with Israel. In Amman, it was announced that the Jordanian forces had been mobilized and were ready if necessary to take part in the battle against the “common enemy.”

Cairo Radio announced that Field-Marshal Hakim Amer, the Egyptian Vice-President and Deputy Commander-in-Chief, had requested that the U.N. Emergency Force in the Middle East (UNEF) should be moved from their posts along the border so that UNEF men would “not be harmed if hostilities break out.” The broadcast added that Major-General Rikhye (the Indian commander of UNEF) had been asked to withdraw his men from the border and concentrate them inside the Gaza Strip because the Egyptian forces were prepared for action should Israel attack any Arab State.

At the United Nations, U Thant described the situation in the Middle East as “potentially very grave” and conferred with the U.A.R. permanent representative at the U.N., Mr. Mohammed el Kony, on the U.A.R. Government's attitude towards the U.N. Emergency Force.

The U.N. Secretariat issued a statement which, after saying that the situation on the U.A.R.-Israel border had “developed suddenly and unexpectedly,” recalled that UNEF had gone into Sinai and the Gaza Strip over 10 years ago with the consent of the Egyptian Government, and had continued there on that basis. “As a peacekeeping force,” said the statement, “it could not remain if that consent were withdrawn, or if the conditions under which it operates were so qualified that the Force were unable to function effectively....”

U Thant also had talks the same day (May 17) with Mr. Goldberg and Lord Caradon, the U.S. and British permanent representatives at the U.N.; with the permanent representatives of the seven countries furnishing contingents to UNEF—Brazil, Canada, Denmark, India, Norway, Sweden, and Yugoslavia; and with the Israeli representative, Mr. Gideon Rafael, to whom the Secretary-General made a strong protest against the “buzzing” by two Israeli planes of a U.N. aircraft carrying Major-General Rikhye.

A statement by the U.N. Secretariat on this incident, which had occurred earlier in the day, said that the plane carrying the UNEF commander, painted white and bearing the U.N. insignia, was on a flight from El Arish to Gaza when it was “buzzed” by two Israeli military aircraft west of the armistice demarcation line; the Israeli planes had tried to make the U.N. aircraft land on the Israeli side of the border and had fired “warning shots,” but the pilot, on General Rikhye's instructions, had flown straight on to land at Gaza airstrip. Israel later apologized for the incident, stating that the U.N. plane had penetrated Israel's airspace and that warning shots had been fired because it refused to answer signals.

An official request for the withdrawal of UNEF from the Egyptian-Israeli border was made to U Thant by the U.A.R. Foreign Minister, Dr. Mahmoud Riad, on May 18. In a cable to the Secretary-General, Dr. Riad said that his Government had “decided to terminate the presence of the U.N. Emergency Force in Egypt and the Gaza Strip”; recalled that it had been stationed there at the invitation of the U.A.R. Government and that its continued presence depended on Egyptian approval; and asked that it should be withdrawn “as soon as possible.”

In his reply, U Thant acknowledged that UNEF had entered Egyptian territory with the consent of the U.A.R. Government and could remain there only so long as that consent continued. Accordingly, the Secretary-General said that the U.A.R.'s request would be complied with and that he was “proceeding to issue instructions for the necessary arrangements to be put in train without delay for the orderly withdrawal of the Force, its vehicles and equipment....” U Thant added, however, that, irrespective of the reasons given by the U.A.R. Government, he had “serious misgivings” about the withdrawal of UNEF because the U.N. Force “has been an important factor in maintaining relative quiet in the area of its deployment during the past 10 years and its withdrawal may have grave implications for peace.”

The U.N. Emergency Force had patrolled the 117-mile-long Egyptian-Israeli frontier in Sinai and the Gaza Strip since the 1956 Suez crisis; it had been stationed on the Egyptian side of the border with the consent of the U.A.R. Government, but not on the Israeli side. At the time its withdrawal was demanded by the U.A.R. Government the strength of UNEF was 3,393 men—978 Indians, 800 Canadians, 580 Yugoslavs, 528 Swedes, 432 Brazilians, 72 Norwegians, and three Danes.

In London, Mr. George Brown (the U.K. Foreign Secretary) said that the U.A.R.'s request for the withdrawal of UNEF made a “mockery” of the peace-keeping work of the United Nations.

Speaking at a dinner of the United Nations Association, Mr. Brown said that the Middle East situation “is critical for us who believe in and support the United Nations and its peace-keeping activities.” After emphasizing that the presence of the UNEF in the Sinai desert in the past 10 years had kept tension down, the Foreign Secretary declared: “It really makes a mockery of the peace-keeping work of the United Nations if, as soon as tension rises, the U.N. Force is told to leave. Indeed, the collapse of UNEF might well have repercussions on other U.N. peace-keeping forces, and the credibility of the United Nations’ efforts in this field are thrown into question.” Mr. Brown added that any decision to withdraw UNEF from the Middle East should be taken in the United Nations after full consultations with all the countries concerned, and not as a result of a unilateral decision.

In Ottawa, the Canadian Foreign Minister, Mr. Paul Martin, told the House of Commons that U Thant's view that UNEF could not remain if U.A.R. consent were withdrawn was not the position taken either by the late Dr. Hammarskjöld as U.N. Secretary-General or by Mr. Lester Pearson when Canadian Minister of External Affairs in 1956. Mr. Pearson had then said that the U.A.R., by accepting the U.N. presence, had also accepted a limitation on its sovereignty, and that it was for the United Nations to decide when the UNEF's mission had been completed. The same night (May 18) Mr. Martin issued a statement saying that the Canadian Government “greatly regrets the circumstances which have led to the Secretary-General's decision to

withdraw the Force,” and was consulting immediately with the other Governments concerned with a view to trying to arrange a meeting of the security Council.

Cairo Radio continued to reiterate that Egyptian and Syrian forces were on maximum alert to deal with any possible Israeli aggression, and announced that U.A.R. forces had already replaced the UNEF contingents along the border with Israel. Iraq and Kuwait announced the mobilization of their forces during the day, bringing to five (with the U.A.R., Syria, and Jordan) the number of Arab countries which had taken similar action—the biggest mobilization in the Middle East since the Suez crisis of 1956. In Tel-Aviv, it was stated that Israel had taken “appropriate measures” in view of the concentration of Arab forces on her borders.

Following U Thant's acceptance of the Egyptian demand, the U.N. Emergency Force in the Middle East was officially withdrawn on this date from the border between the U.A.R. and Israel, on which it had been stationed for 10 years. The Force was declared to have ceased to exist after a ceremony at Gaza in which the U.N. flag was hauled down, and the 3,400 UNEF troops withdrew to their barracks to await repatriation to their countries. The positions formerly held by UNEF were manned by the Palestine Liberation Organization, which, it was reported, had been incorporated into the Egyptian Army.

In a report to the security Council, U Thant said he had complied with the U.A.R. demand for the withdrawal of UNEF for the following reasons:

“(A) The UNEF was introduced into the territory of the U.A.R. on the basis of an agreement reached in Cairo (in 1956) between the Secretary-General [the late Dr. Hammarskjöld] and the President of Egypt, and it therefore seemed fully clear to me that since U.A.R. consent was withdrawn, it was incumbent on the Secretary-General to give orders for the withdrawal of the Force. The consent of the host country is a basic principle which has applied to all U.N. peace-keeping operations.

“(B) In practical fact, UNEF could not remain or function without the continuing consent and co-operation of the host country.

“ I have also been influenced by my deep concern to avoid any action which would either compromise or endanger the contingents which make up the force. The UNEF is, after all, a peacekeeping, not an enforcement, operation.

“(C) In the face of the request for the withdrawal of the Force, there seemed to me to be no alternative course of action which could be taken by the Secretary-General without putting into question the sovereign authority of the Government of the U.A.R. within its own territory.”

(D) In his report to the security Council, U Thant said that the situation in the Near East was “more disturbing and indeed more menacing” than at any time since 1956. To a considerable extent, he said, the presence of UNEF had “allowed us for 10 years to ignore some of the harsh realities of the underlying conflict,” and the Governments concerned and the U.N. were now confronted with “a brutally realistic and dangerous situation.”

In Cairo, the Ministry of Religious Affairs ordered the country's religious leaders to preach a *jihad* (holy war) to regain Palestine for the Arabs; violent radio attacks were made on Israel, "Zionism," and "imperialism"; and a strongly-worded statement was issued by Field-Marshal Hakim Amer saying that the U.A.R. forces had taken up positions "from which they can deliver massive retaliation against Israeli aggression."

The calling-up of reservists by both Egypt and Israel was announced on this date. Press reports from Cairo continued to speak of the continued eastward movement of strong Egyptian armoured forces in the direction of the Israel border.

Mr. Ahmed Shukairy, leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization, said at a Cairo press conference that the 8,000 men of the P.L.O. had been placed under the military commands of the U.A.R., Syria, and Iraq. He declared that Israel would be "completely annihilated" if war broke out and said that the P.L.O. would continue its raids into Israel, these raids being regarded as "a fundamental stage in the liberation of the homeland." Mr. Shukairy also called upon the Jordanian people to overthrow King Hussein.

The Syrian Defence Minister, Major-General Hafez el Assad, said that Syria's armed forces were "ready not only to repel Israeli aggression but to take the initiative in liberating Palestine and destroying the Zionist presence in the Arab homeland."

Speaking in the Israeli Parliament (*Knesset*) on May 22, Mr. Eshkol said that within the past few days Egypt had increased her forces in Sinai from 35,000 to 80,000 men, which in turn had compelled Israel to take "precautionary measures." After emphasizing that Israel had no aggressive designs on either Egypt or Syria, he proposed a mutual reduction of troop concentrations in the Middle East, pledging Israel to withdraw her forces from the Sinai border if Egypt did likewise.

Urging a concerted international effort to outlaw sabotage and terrorism against any member-State of the United Nations, Mr. Eshkol said that the primary cause of the present tension lay in a series of over 100 Syrian-inspired infiltrations and assaults into Israel. Only after all political means had been exhausted had Israel resorted to more forceful action against Syria. "On the heightening and growing effectiveness of these sabotage activities," Mr. Eshkol added, "I found it necessary to address clear and explicit warnings to Syria that we were not prepared to put up with their continuation."

In Cairo, it was announced that President Nasser had accepted an offer of Iraqi Army and Air Force units to assist the U.A.R. in the event of an outbreak of hostilities. It was stated that this offer had been conveyed by Lieut.-General Taher Yehia, who had arrived in Cairo at the head of an official Iraqi delegation with a message to President Nasser from President Aref of Iraq.

U Thant left New York by air for talks with President Nasser in Cairo. According to a U.N. spokesman, the Secretary-General had no intention of visiting Israel or any other country in the area other than the United Arab Republic.

The closing of the Straits of Tiran, at the entrance of the Gulf of Aqaba, to Israeli shipping was announced by the U.A.R. Government, thereby blockading the Israeli port of Eilat at the head of the Gulf–Israel's outlet to the Red Sea. The Cairo announcement said that the blockade would apply to vessels flying the Israeli flag and to the ships of any other country carrying strategic goods to Eilat. The Egyptian action was described by Mr. Eshkol as “a gross infringement of international law” and “an aggressive act against Israel.” [Economist]

The 100-mile-long Gulf of Aqaba varies from 10 to 30 miles in breadth and is bordered by four countries –Israel and Jordan at the head of the Gulf, where each country has a small coastline of about six miles; Egyptian territory on the west (the Sinai peninsula); and Saudi Arabia on the east. Access to the Gulf is restricted at its entrance by two rocky islands, Tiran and Sanafir, off the Saudi Arabian coast; as the entrance to the Gulf is impassable east of Tiran because of reefs and shoals, shipping to the Israeli port of Eilat and the Jordanian port of Aqaba has to use the channel skirting the western (Sinai) side of the Straits of Tiran. Here the deep-water shipping channel is only 800 to 1,000 yards wide, and since the withdrawal of UNEF it was commanded by Egyptian guns at Sharm el Sheikh, at the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula where the Gulf of Aqaba meets the Red Sea. A small U.N. detachment had been stationed at Sharm el Sheikh since 1956.

President Nasser announced the closure of the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping in a speech at an Egyptian Air Force headquarters in Sinai. The text, which subsequently became available in London and Washington, is given below as brought by the *New York Times*. After speaking of the 1956 Suez crisis, and of the British and French support for Israel at that time, President Nasser continued:

“Israel today is not backed by Britain and France as was the case in 1956. It has the United States, which supports it and supplies it with arms....

“We are now face to face with Israel. In recent days Israel has been making threats of aggression and has been boasting. On May 12 a very impertinent statement was made.... The statement said that the Israeli commanders have announced they would carry out military operations against Syria in order to occupy Damascus and overthrow the Syrian Government. On the same day the Israeli Premier, Eshkol, made a strongly threatening statement against Syria....

“On May 13 we received accurate information that Israel was concentrating on the Syrian border huge armed forces of about 11 to 13 brigades. These forces were divided into two fronts, one south of Lake Tiberias and the other north of the lake. The decision made by Israel at this time was to carry out an aggression against Syria as of May 17. On May 14 we took our measures, discussed the matter and contacted our Syrian brothers. The Syrians also had this information.

“Lieut-General Fawzi left for Syria to co-ordinate matters. We told them that we had decided that if Syria was attacked, Egypt would enter the battle from the first minute. This was the situation at May 14. The forces began to move in the direction of Sinai to take up normal positions....

“On May 16 we requested the withdrawal of the U.N. Emergency Force. A world-wide campaign, led by the United States, Britain, and Canada, began opposing the withdrawal of UNEF from Egypt. Thus we felt that there were attempts to turn UNEF into a force serving neo-imperialism. It is obvious that UNEF entered Egypt with our approval and therefore cannot continue to stay in Egypt except with our approval.

“A campaign is also being mounted against the U.N. Secretary-General because he made a faithful and honest decision and could not surrender to the pressure brought to bear upon him by the United States, Britain, and Canada to make UNEF an instrument for implementing imperialism's plans.... I say this quite frankly, that had UNEF ignored its basic mission and turned to achieving the aims of imperialism, we would have regarded it as a hostile force and forcibly disarmed it. We are definitely capable of doing such a job.

“At the same time I say that UNEF has honourably and faithfully carried out its duties. The U.N. Secretary-General refused to succumb to pressure [and] issued immediate orders to UNEF to withdraw. Consequently, we laud the UNEF, which stayed 10 years in our country serving peace. And when they left—at a time when the neo-imperialist forces wanted to divert them from their basic aim—we gave them a cheerful send-off and saluted them.

“Our forces are now in Sinai, and we are in a state of complete mobilization in Gaza and Sinai.

“We note that there is a great deal of talk about peace these days. International peace—international security—U.N. intervention—and so on and so forth, which appears daily in the Press. Why is it that no one spoke about peace, the United Nations, and security when on May 12 the Israeli Premier and the Israeli commanders made their statements that they would occupy Damascus, overthrow the Syrian regime, and occupy a part of Syrian territory?...

“If there is a true desire for peace, we say that we also work for peace. But does peace mean that we should ignore the rights of the Palestinian people because of the lapse of time? Does peace mean that we should concede our rights because of the lapse of time? They speak about a ‘U.N. presence in the region for the sake of peace.’ Does ‘U.N. presence in the region for peace’ mean that we should close our eyes to everything?

“The United Nations adopted a number of resolutions in favour of the Palestinian people. Israel implemented none of these resolutions. This brought no reaction from the United States. Today U.S. Senators, members of the House of Representatives, the Press, and the entire world speak in favour of Israel, of the Jews. But nothing is said in favour of the Arabs.... The peace talk is heard only when Israel is in danger. But when Arab rights and the rights of the Palestinian people are lost, no one speaks about peace, rights, or anything.

“Therefore it is clear that an alliance exists between the Western Powers—chiefly represented by the United States and Britain—and Israel. There is a political alliance prompts the Western Powers to give military equipment to Israel.

“Yesterday and the day before yesterday the entire world was speaking about Sharm el Sheikh, navigation in the Gulf of Aqaba, the port of Eilat. This morning I heard the B.B.C. say that in

1956 Abdel Nasser pledged to open the Gulf of Aqaba. Of course this is not true. It was copied from a British paper called the *Daily Mail*. No such thing happened. Abdel Nasser would never forfeit any U.A.R. right. We would never give away a grain of sand from our soil or our country.

“The armed forces yesterday occupied Sharm el Sheikh. It is an affirmation of our rights and our sovereignty over the Gulf of Aqaba. The Gulf constitutes Egyptian territorial waters. Under no circumstances will we allow the Israeli flag to pass through the Gulf of Aqaba.

“The Jews threatened war. We tell them: You are welcome, we are ready for war. Our armed forces and our people are ready for war, but under no circumstances will we abandon any of our rights. This water is ours.

“War might be an opportunity for Israel and Rabin to test their forces against ours and see that what they wrote about the 1956 battle and the occupation of Sinai was all a lot of nonsense.

“With all this there is imperialism, Israel, and reaction. Reaction casts doubt on everything, and so does the Islamic Alliance. We all know that the Islamic Alliance is represented by three States—Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Iran. They are saying that the purpose of the Islamic Alliance is to unite the Moslems against Israel.

“I would like the Islamic Alliance to serve the Palestine question in only one way—by preventing the supply of oil to Israel. The oil which now reaches Israel through Eilat comes from one of the Islamic Alliance States. It goes to Eilat from Iran.

“Such is the Islamic Alliance. It is an imperialist alliance, and this means it sides with Zionism because Zionism is the main ally of imperialism. The Arab world, which is now mobilized to the highest degree, knows all this. It knows how to deal with the imperialist agents, the allies of Zionism, and the fifth column.

“They say they want to co-ordinate their plans with us. We cannot co-ordinate our plans in any way with Islamic Alliance members because it would mean giving our plans to the Jews and to Israel. This is a vital battle. When we said that we were ready for the battle, we meant that we would surely fight if Syria or any other Arab State was subjected to aggression....”

Saying that President Nasser's action had “reopened the explosive legal question of whether the Gulf of Aqaba is an international waterway subject to free passage by ships of all nations,” the New York Times commented:

“In 1956, Israel went to war against Egypt largely to establish her right of free passage through the Strait. She never completely established the principle, however. At the most, her action brought a U.N. Emergency Force, which by its presence on the Egyptian shore of the Strait has assured free passage for shipping to Elath (Eilat), in southern Israel. Now that the U.N. Force has been withdrawn, President Nasser... has moved to re-establish the principle that Egypt rightfully controls access to the narrow, 100-mile-long gulf.

“The legal question involves complex issues of history, geography, and international law. The Strait, which connects the Gulf with the Red Sea, is about three miles wide. Ships sailing through it pass through the territorial waters of Egypt, which observes a three-mile limit. It is Mr. Nasser's contention, therefore, that the U.A.R. exercises ‘sovereignty’ over the Strait and has a right to determine which ships shall pass. A supplementary argument raised by Cairo is that the Gulf of Aqaba traditionally has been a ‘closed sea’ and that Israel has no basis in international law to claim access.

“On the opposing side, it is generally accepted that the U.A.R. exercises traditional sovereignty over the Strait, but the argument is made that it cannot arbitrarily prevent passage because the Strait leads into international waters. This was an argument outlined by the United States in an *aide-memoire* on Feb. 11, 1957, to the Israel Government—a Note that was largely responsible for Israel's decision to withdraw her forces from the Sinai Peninsula to the west of the Gulf. The *aide-memoire*, from Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, stated:

“ ‘The United States believes that the Gulf comprehends international waters and that no nation has the right to prevent free and innocent passage in the Gulf and through the straits giving access thereto.’ ”

“The contention that the Gulf represents ‘international waters’ is based on the fact that four nations—the U.A.R., Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia—all border on it. By international law, it is argued, the right of access cannot be denied to any littoral States. Since the Gulf involves international waters, this argument continues, it cannot be closed by any one nation to ‘free and innocent passage.’ ”

“The phrase ‘free and innocent passage’ has a long history in international law, although it still has no well-defined, universally accepted meaning. It is generally interpreted to mean that a ship shall not be subject to arbitrary search or seizure.... ”

“In 1950 the Egyptian Government endorsed the principle of free and innocent passage into the Gulf of Aqaba. In a Note to the United States, Cairo said that its occupation of the two islands at the entrance to the Gulf was only to protect the islands and was ‘in no way conceived in a spirit of obstructing in any way innocent passage through the stretch of water.’ ”

The Prime Minister of Israel, as stated, described the closure of the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping as an act of aggression against Israel. In a brief statement to the *Knesset*, Mr. Eshkol called on the United Nations and the major Powers to act without delay in maintaining the right of free navigation through the Straits of Titan and in the Gulf, and emphasized that Israel continued to regard as valid the U.N. resolution of March 1957 guaranteeing freedom of shipping in the Gulf of Aqaba. Mr. Eshkol stressed that when Israel withdrew its forces from Sharm el Sheikh 10 years earlier, she had done so after receiving assurances from the Powers that there would be no interference with freedom of navigation in the Gulf of Aqaba.

In Washington, President Johnson issued a statement saying *inter alia* that the U.S. Government regarded the Gulf of Aqaba as an international waterway, and that the blockade of Israeli shipping in the Gulf was “illegal and potentially dangerous to peace.” It also expressed the U.S.

Government's "dismay" at the "hurried withdrawal of the U.N. Emergency Force" from Gaza and Sinai, and emphasized that the United States was "firmly committed" to the territorial integrity of all the nations of the Middle East. The President's statement was worded as follows:

"... The Government of the United States is deeply concerned, in particular, with 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 U.N. 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....

"Third, we deplore the recent build-up of military forces and believe it a matter of urgent importance to reduce troop concentrations...."

After saying that the closure of the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping had "brought a new and grave dimension to the crisis," the statement continued:

"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.... 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.

"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 the 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....

"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 neighbours 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 U.N. Charter and the general armistice agreements. These provide an honourable means of preventing hostilities until, through the efforts of the international community, a peace with justice and honour can be achieved...."

In London, the British Foreign Office issued a statement affirming that the Gulf of Aqaba was an international waterway which should remain open to the shipping of all nations, and adding: "If it appeared that any attempt to interfere with ships going through the waterway was likely to be made, we should support international action through the United Nations to secure free passage."

After a three-hour meeting of the British Cabinet, it was decided that Mr. George Thomson (Minister of State, Foreign Office) should leave for Washington and New York for discussions with U.S. and U.N. officials. Mr. Brown, the Foreign Secretary, left London for Moscow the same day for discussions with Mr. Gromyko, the Soviet Foreign Minister.

On the same day in London, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, who was then on a State visit to Britain, said that his country was "in the vanguard of our brother Arab States in combating the Israeli danger." He announced that he had ordered the Saudi Arabian forces to be ready to participate in "the battle against Israeli aggression."

Declaring that all Arab countries, whatever their differences, were united in their attitude to Israel, King Faisal said that "any Arab who falters in this battle is not worthy of the name of Arab." He supported the withdrawal of the U.N. Emergency Force, and said that he did not believe that there were any problems between Saudi Arabia and the U.A.R. which might lead to friction or conflict. Reminded of some of President Nasser's insults to himself personally, King Faisal replied that his attitude towards President Nasser was one of "respect" and that "we harbour no animosity towards the United Arab Republic."

In Moscow, the Soviet Government issued a statement blaming Israel for "a dangerous worsening of tension in the Middle East" and accusing it of "playing the role of colonial overseer for the imperialist Powers over the peoples of the Arab East." The statement said that "should anyone try to unleash aggression in the Middle East he would be met not only by the united strength of the Arab countries but also by the strong opposition to aggression of the Soviet Union and all peace-loving States."

The Soviet statement said that following the "armed attack by Israeli forces on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic on April 7" [i.e. the air battle in which six Syrian planes were shot down—see 22062 A], the "ruling circles of Israel" had continued to "inflare the atmosphere of war hysteria" and had threatened "punitive action" against Syria. Israel had received "direct and indirect encouragement" from "imperialist circles which seek to restore colonial oppression to the Arab lands," but the Arab States had shown their solidarity with "the courageous struggle of the Syrian people who are upholding their independence," and the U.A.R., "honouring its commitment of alliance for joint defence with Syria," had taken "steps to contain aggression."

As regards the withdrawal of UNEF, the Soviet Government said: "Considering that the presence of U.N. troops in the Gaza area and the Sinai Peninsula would give Israel advantages for staging a military provocation against Arab countries, the U.A.R. Government asked the United Nations to pull out its troops from this area."

In Ottawa, Mr. Martin stated that Canada considered the Egyptian blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba as a violation of international law on the right of innocent passage and would strongly oppose such action.

U Thant arrived in Cairo and immediately conferred with Major-General Rikhye, commander of the U.N. Emergency Force; Lieut.-General Odd Bull, Chief of Staff of the U.N. Truce Supervision Organization in Palestine (UNTSO); and Mr. Laurence Michelmore, Commissioner-General of the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

All British and American nationals in Israel, Egypt, Syria, and Jordan were advised by their Governments to leave those countries at the earliest possible opportunity in view of the situation prevailing in the Middle East.

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