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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

15 May 1984

See Nigel,

Sir Geoffrey Howe wishes Mr Brittan to be aware of discussions between British Caledonian and a Libyan intermediary in London aimed at expediting the release of Mr Ledingham after a secret talk between a relative of Qadhafi and a representative of the British Government. The facts are as follows.

On 11 and 12 May British Caledonian lodged copies of Sir A Thompson's letter to Qadhafi about Ledingham with the Italian Embassy in Tripoli, the Saudi Embassy in London, and with Mr Ahmed Al-Huni, a Libyan exile in London who is editor of the Arabic language newspaper 'Al-Arab', and well known to the Home Office.

On 12 May British Caledonian were told by Al-Huni that he had Saudi blessing (from King Fahd's office) to offer his services as an intermediary in the matter of the detainees. He had accordingly been in touch with his patron, Ahmed Qadhaf Al-Dam (Qadhafi's cousin and itinerant trouble-shooter, who is known to British official sources as AQAD). AQAD had allegedly told Al-Huni that he could secure the release of Ledingham and of Mr Campbell of Intairdrill. AQAD suggested that:

- (a) there should be no more British broadcasts about detainees held by Libya, and
- (b) the British Government should agree to secret talks with AQAD, either in London or, preferably, in Paris.

At British Caledonian's request, this new development was explained to Mr Luce late on 12 May. The company stressed that British Caledonian had to show their own staff that they

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and others in Government were taking active steps to work for Ledingham's release. They therefore felt that HMG should take AQAD's 'feeler' seriously and consider it sympathetically.

On Mr Luce's instructions the following interim reply was given to British Caledonian on 13 May:

- (i) HMG maintained their position of principle that our two detainees should be released forthwith as an earnest of Libyan good faith;
- (ii) nonetheless we were prepared in principle to consider the idea of sending a British emissary (who would not necessarily be governmental) to meet AQAD in a third country for secret talks; but
- (iii) any exchange of prisoners was out, and could not be covered in such talks;
- (iv) we would give British Caledonian a firm answer in due course.

British Caledonian passed this message the same day to Colonel Nigel Bromage (formerly of the Saudi National Guard, now employed occasionally by British Caledonian as a contact man with Arabs) for onward transmission to Al-Huni. We again stressed that the matter should be kept absolutely confidential, since any leak would be fatal.

We have considered what definitive reply should be given to British Caledonian. Sir Geoffrey Howe is conscious that any secret contact with the Libyans might be exploited and publicised by them to show that HMG are keen to repair the damage done by the break in relations, and excessively concerned over the case of Mr Ledingham. On the other hand, Sir Geoffrey accepts that British Caledonian are genuinely worried about the morale of their staff and can reasonably expect HMG to leave no stone unturned in trying, with the company's help, to press the Libyans for his release. Sir Geoffrey's view at this stage is that the balance of advantage lies in taking the following steps:

- (i) we should respond positively to the proposal for a meeting with AQAD, and so inform British Caledonian;
- (ii) we should endeavour to keep the meeting secret, but should accept the possibility that news of it will leak. To this end, the emissary we use

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should not be directly connected with HMG.
Ideally he should be disavowable;

- (iii) our aim should be to be seen to be trying to secure the release of the detainees, and to lower the tension between Britain and Libya. A main part of the emissary's brief would be to make it clear that an exchange of prisoners remains totally unacceptable to us;
- (iv) we might suggest in the first place that the emissary himself should be Colonel Bromage; a retired officer on British Caledonian's payroll, and a good Arabist. If AQAD refused to meet Bromage, on the grounds that he did not represent HMG, we should at least have shown willing. If British Caledonian and the Libyans continued to press for a contact, we might in due course consider whether we should offer a meeting between AQAD and a retired Arabist member of ^{who is personally known} to AQAD, but would have no current official status or employment.

Sir Geoffrey plans to mention how he intends to handle this matter to the Prime Minister later this afternoon. He would of course welcome any views Mr Brittan may have before this meeting (at 1645 hours), or in any case by close of play today.

Y ever,
P F Ricketts

(P F Ricketts)
Private Secretary

* Some reservations have however been expressed as to whether Bromage is the right choice: we are checking on this urgently and may decide to go directly to a retired

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