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C O N F I D E N T I A L

REPORT ON THIRD SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL  
ASSEMBLY: "CONSIDERATION OF THE GRAVE SITUATION  
IN TUNISIA OBTAINING SINCE 19 JULY, 1961."

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It will be hardly necessary for me to trace the background to the Franco-Tunisian conflict which flared up in the naval city of Bizerte town in Tunisia on 19th July, 1961. The French base their legal position in Bizerte on a 1958 agreement which leaves the big naval and air base in their hands subject to further negotiations. The Tunisians, who contend that the French had repeatedly rebuffed attempts to open negotiations, blockaded the base and also moved some troops into a strip of the Sahara desert they claim. The clash that followed resulted in French occupation of much of the city of Bizerte that lies outside their base. In refusing to pull their forces back to the base, the French contend that guarantees are needed first to ensure that the Tunisians will not again stage a blockade and disrupt communications between outlying sections of the base.

What pained the Afro-Asians in the United Nations was not so much at the French occupation of the city of Bizerte but at the extraordinary ferocity and ruthlessness of the French retaliation against Tunisian demonstrations. As a result of this inhuman attack, about 800 Tunisians (mostly civilians) were killed and over 1,000 wounded. I have dealt with this episode in my speech delivered on 22 August, 1961. Copies of my speech have already been pouched to the Foreign Office.

The Security Council met on 21 July and began consideration of the complaint by Tunisia concerning "acts of aggression by France infringing the sovereignty and security of Tunisia and threatening international peace and security". At the Council debate on 21 and 22 July, two different approaches were revealed. The United

Arab Republic and Russia called for immediate evacuation of all French troops from Tunisia. The United States and Britain urged, instead, an immediate cease-fire, the return of all forces to their previous positions, and negotiations between France and Tunisia on the issues. Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold, in an unusual intervention in the debate, emphasised that a cease-fire was essential. A Liberian resolution calling for an immediate truce and withdrawal of troops to their original positions was approved by 10 to 0 votes. France did not exercise its veto power but abstained. On the same day Paris announced that it had ordered French forces at Bizerte to cease fire "as they have achieved their objectives." Tunisia soon followed suit.

Tunisia insisted on the French compliance of the Security Council resolution calling for "a return of all armed forces to their original positions." France, however, refused to pull back its forces without "guarantees" against new Tunisian demonstrations. At Tunisia's invitation, U.N. Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold flew to Tunis on the morning of 24 August. President de Gaulle rejected his bid to visit Paris, and the French Commander at Bizerte likewise refused to see him.

The Security Council met again on 28 July and considered a draft resolution tabled by Ceylon, Liberia and the United Arab Republic (S/4903), expressing "serious concern over the fact that France has not fully complied" with the interim Security Council resolution adopted by the Council on 22 July, and that "the situation continues to represent a serious threat to international peace and security". The draft resolution would have the Council "invite France to comply immediately with all the provisions of the interim resolution."

The French delegation, in a letter to the Council President on the same day (28 July), informed him that "the French delegation does not consider it necessary to participate in any debate which may take place in the Security Council."

On the second day of the debate (29 July) the Council received two new draft resolutions; one cosponsored by Ceylon, Liberia and the United Arab Republic (S/4904), and the other by Turkey (S/4905).

The first three-power draft would "invite France to comply immediately with all the provisions of the interim resolution", while the second draft cosponsored by the same three members would "invite France to enter immediately into negotiations with Tunisia with a view to the rapid evacuation of French forces from Tunisia". The Turkish draft, backed by the United States and Britain, "urges the early opening of negotiations for a peaceful resolution/of the question of Bizerte, having due regard for Tunisian sovereignty."

In the voting which took place on the second day (29 July) no resolution gained the seven votes necessary for its adoption.

The Asian-African group met on 31 July to consider the question. (A report on that meeting has been submitted to the Foreign Office on 7 August, 1961). It was decided that the convening of the Emergency Special session of the General Assembly should be requested and our delegation decided to cosponsor such a request, vide our cable No. UNB.607 of July 31, 1961.

The group met again on 3 August and then again on 4 August and decided to request the convening of the Special session under Rule 8 (a) of the Rules of Procedure. A formal request was made on 7 August by 47 members of the United Nations. Thirty-five of the forty-six members of the Asian-African group signed the original letter of request on that day. So did Cuba, Yugoslavia and Brazil. Nine members of the Soviet bloc sent a separate letter addressed to the United Nations Secretariat, instead of the Secretary-General. Under the Rules of Procedure, the sponsors still lacked three of the fifty signatures that would make the session mandatory. On the same evening (7 August) the Secretary-General polled other members of the United Nations to determine if there were at least three other countries willing to hold a Special session.

On the next day (8 August) the United States delegation, in a reply to the Secretary-General, refused to support the request for a Special session. Mr. Adlai Stevenson stated in the reply that "recent developments encourage us to believe that an early settlement of this dispute in the spirit of Article 33 of the United Nations Charter may be possible." He then went on, "In order not to imperil such a constructive development, the United States must withhold its agreement to the request for a Special session."

On the same day, Argentina and Venezuela announced their support of the move for a Special session, bringing the number of supporters to forty-nine. On 10 August when Uruguay endorsed the request, the majority was completed, and the Secretary-General summoned the Special session for 21 August, 1961. France immediately announced that she would boycott the session.

The Asian-African group met twice to consider the line of action and a committee of 12 was formed with Liberia as Chairman to prepare a draft resolution to be tabled, if possible, on the first day of the session. The Committee reported to the group on 17 August, and the draft resolution submitted was approved by a large majority of the members. Burma agreed to cosponsor the same, anticipating the Government's approval (vide this office Cable No. UNB.650 of 17 August, 1961).

The draft resolution (A/L.351), cosponsored by 31 Asian-Africans and Yugoslavia, was presented on the opening day of the session (21 August) by the Permanent Representative of Liberia. The draft calls on France to comply with the Security Council interim resolution demanding the withdrawal of her military forces to positions held before 19 July. It also recognizes the "sovereign right of Tunisia to call for the withdrawal of all French armed forces present in its territory without its consent." It calls upon France and Tunisia "to enter into immediate negotiations" to devise peaceful measures for

the withdrawal of all French armed forces from Tunisian territory. The draft measure does not call for a condemnation of France, as the sponsors very much wanted to obtain the support of the Brazaville group which is closely linked to France.

The initial reception to the draft resolution was mixed. Eastern European delegations called it too mild because it did not explicitly condemn France. On the other side Britain and Latin Americans let it be known that they considered the resolution severe, condemnatory of France by implication. The United States delegation privately described the draft as moderate and constructive, but the cosponsors were informed that it could not vote for it for fear of damaging Franco-United States alliance. Ambassador Stevenson spoke on the second day of the session. He appealed to France and Tunisia to negotiate without delay their differences over the Bizerte base in the interest of world peace. He had to steer a very careful course because, as he pointed out, two friends of the United States were involved in the dispute. Throughout the debate, the West went on the defensive while the Soviet Union seized the issue to attack the worldwide system of military bases of the United States and its allies.

I spoke immediately after Ambassador Stevenson, and copies of the speech have been pouched to the Foreign Office. My speech was extensively reproduced in the New York Times of 23 August and broadcast over the Radio network WMCA the same night. New York Post of the same date described it as the "voice of realism in the Asian-African group."

On behalf of the sponsors I contacted the Permanent Representatives of Scandinavian countries on 23 August with a view to obtaining their support of the draft resolution. While the delegations of Denmark and Iceland were reticent regarding their reaction, three others (Norway, Sweden and Finland) told me that they had doubts about the propriety of Preambular paragraphs 2 and 4, and Operative paragraph 3.

Sweden and Finland particularly would prefer to eliminate Preambular paragraph 4 altogether, since, they argued, the whole paragraph was uncalled-for. I conveyed their reaction to the sponsors who still maintained that the retention of that paragraph was essential. Their position was reinforced on the next morning when the Brazaville group of eleven African states decided to vote for the resolution. In fact, this unexpected move of the African states of the French Community as a gesture towards Asian-African solidarity was the most significant aspect of the whole session. Other highlights of the voting were the lining up of four NATO countries (Denmark, Norway, Iceland and Turkey) with the Asian-Africans, and the abstention of Japan, the only country in the 46 member group to do so. Ivory Coast and Niger, two members of the Brazaville group, although they had earlier pledged support to the draft resolution, were absent at the time of voting. Ambassador Mongi Slim of Tunisia told me after the voting that these two delegations received instructions from their governments, at the eleventh hour, to abstain. Obviously, to avoid embarrassment they absented themselves from the Assembly Hall while the roll-call vote was taken.

Ambassador Stevenson, visibly unhappy when the result of the vote was announced (60-0-30), went up to the rostrum and explained that his delegation had abstained in the voting because he feared it would retard negotiations for which the United States had been working "continuously and tirelessly." He pledged the United States to continue these efforts.

The results of the United Nations' pressure on France remain to be seen. The big question is how President de Gaulle will react. The indications are that the General Assembly decision is unlikely to cause any great change in the French attitude. News despatches from Paris of 26 August commented on the United Nations resolution as a victory for Tunisia and a defeat for France. The same

sources also expressed the belief that President Bourguiba of Tunisia, having achieved his victory in the United Nations, might now be willing to take the steps necessary to pave the way for negotiations.

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( U Thant )

Permanent Representative of  
Burma

The Permanent Secretary  
Foreign Office  
Rangoon

28th August, 1961