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PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH MIKE WILLESEE - 17 APRIL 1986

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This is an unedited transcript and should be checked against what goes to air.

WILLESEE: ... danger of escalation ... carrying that burden ...

PM: He is very conscious of it. One of the things that he said to me which is sustained in this time was that he had spoken to the wives of the pilots of the plane that is missing. And even in their time of personal tragedy that they have expressed support for him. And he seemed to take some measure of comfort from that.

WILLESEE: Did you discuss the possibility of escalation with the President?

PM: Well, in the discussion that we had on the issue, not only with him but with others Mike, there was some reference to the possibility that there would be further attacks, yes that was mentioned - further terrorist attacks.

WILLESEE: How do you assess that danger?

PM: Well, I can't go to all the evidence available to me, but I think there is not much grounds for optimism that there may not be some further attacks. But what I believe needs to be done, Mike, and this is in a modest way, the contribution that we try to make in the United Nations, to say look the Charter of the United Nations, which was invoked by the United States, Article 51, does provide a range of possible methods for trying to bring parties together. We have go, all of us, to try and bring that about.

WILLESEE: I'll come back to that point in a moment Prime Minister. How much have you seen of President Reagan's irrefutable proof of Libyan involvement, direct involvement in acts of terrorism.

PM: I have seen a good deal. I saw some before I left Australia. And I have been given a further briefing here.

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WILLESEE: Enough to convince you?

PM: Yes.

WILLESEE: Have you asked the President why he doesn't reveal that information publicly?

PM: I have put to the President and others my view that it is in the best interests, not merely of the United States, but I would think of the whole community, that that direct evidence should be public. They say they have given, if you like, a sort of synthesis, a condensation of it. I take the view, personally, that it is best to have the actual material. But let me say this, while that view I express is an obviously sensible one, you have got to take into account the concerns that they have about the exposure of their intelligence system. And it would be presumptuous for any of us to tell, I think, the United States what it should do in terms of some concern it has about exposing these capacities. I can only say, in terms of my own experience, Mike, that I have seen the evidence, I have had some considerable briefing. And I am convinced both as to the authenticity and the compelling nature of the evidence.

WILLESEE: Did President Reagan seek public support from Australia?

PM: No, he didn't.

WILLESEE: Do you believe he would like it?

PM: I believe that the United States is sensible about this. I made it clear before I left Australia, we made it clear in our statement in the United Nations, I made it clear in the private conversations that I have had here in the United States which reflect our public position. What we are about is to try and say how we see it as to what has happened and as to what should happen in the future. The future is the important thing. Now, our statements have been interpreted in a number of ways. Following our statement in the United Nations, Mike, a representative of Libya attacked us for supporting the United States. Before I left Australia Mr Howard attacked us for not supporting them. Now, I am not, as I said before I left I Australia, going to get into some squalid auction about where you get on some support metre. Our responsibility is to say it as we see it. We have made it quite clear that the essential condition for bringing to an end the tensions in the area, is an undertaking and abiding by a commitment by Libya not to direct acts of terrorism.

WILLESEE: Did the President express any attitude about the reaction to his decision from his European allies?

PM: Well, I think it is fair to say Mike, and you will appreciate that when you have discussions with people like the President, there has to be a degree of confidentiality, but I think I don't breach that confidentiality to say there is some sense of disappointment.

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WILLESEE: What was the President's reaction to the Australian proposal for the United Nations' intervention and the mediation?

PM: He didn't go into that in any detail. I think the fair statement is this, Mike, that the United States like the rest of us, would like to see a resolution of this matter by one or the other of the peaceful avenues which as identified in Article 33 of the Charter of the United Nations. Now there must I suppose, on the evidence to this point, be some doubt about the preparedness of Libya to give the undertakings to desist from terrorist activities. But that, as I have said in the Parliament, and as Mr Hayden has also said and as we have said in the United Nations, is the essential condition for bringing an end to this confrontation.

WILLESEE: There is one newspaper report which said that US Government sources disliked the Australian proposal because "it equated Libyan terrorism with what the US sees as a legitimate US response". Now have you come across that sort of feeling in Washington?

PM: No, there is not an equation. And I have received no criticism along those lines. And I think indeed, if you look at the statement I made in the Parliament and the sorts of things that Mr Hayden has said in response to questions and the statement made by Mr Woolcott on Australia's behalf in the United Nations it is quite clear where the basic emphasis is put. And I repeat, there can be no end to this tension, this conflict, until there is a repudiation Libya of the tactic of terrorism.

WILLESEE: How many other countries supported the Australian proposal in the Security Council?

PM: What I am given to understand Mike is this, that the Secretary-General and the President of the Council have expressed interest in the concept of our approach. And, I understand, without having had identified to me the particular countries but a number of countries have expressed some interest in what we have said. I am told that after the statement was made, there was a more than usual interest in acquiring copies of the speech by Mr Woolcott. There does seem to be a considerable amount of interest. Now, whether that goes to the point that there is sufficient support for some sort of resolution, I am simply not in a position to say at this point.

WILLESEE: Did you discuss with President Reagan what sort of person or persons might play the role of mediator?

PM: No, I didn't. Indeed, nor did our statement to the United Nations suggest that there was one nation or one particular group of nations that should assume the role of mediator. Because after all, Article 33 of the United Nations Charter only talked about mediation, Mike, as one possible area. There is mediation, there is negotiation, there ... there is a range of things. So Australia didn't specifically suggest a nation or a group of nations as mediator.

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WILLESEE: Prime Minister, it seems reasonable to presume that the US has good quality intelligence coming out of Libya. Have you had access to that?

PM: You will appreciate, Mike, that I can't breach confidentiality. I have, in confidence, been briefed. And all I can say is two things. Firstly, there is no doubt as to the authenticity of the material that I have seen. And in the light of seeing that material and the briefing I have received, I find the evidence compelling as to the fact that Libya has directed, controlled and exported terrorism against innocent civilians and that it has prepared in the past fairly extensive plans for further acts of terrorism. And my plea for what declared one Prime Minister of one concerned nation is worth, is this that Libya should see that in the interests of its own people and the interests of the region and in the interests of the world, that the pursuit of that course can lead to nothing but disaster. And I would plead that Colonel Gaddafi should bring an end to that tactic, I am prepared to sit down and try resolve the areas of differences that we have. That is the course of action that, we believe as a government, is a responsible one. And we will do what we can to try and produce that outcome.

WILLESEE: What is your understanding now of Colonel Gaddafi's position in Libya, is he under threat?

PM: I understand that since the attack there has been some evidence of internal dissension and some fighting. But, I haven't got up to the latest hour briefing on that, Mike.

WILLESEE: Has this trip to Washington brought you closer personally to the American view on this issue?

PM: Well, I think what you will see, that the statement that was made in the United Nations since I have been here and which was made following consultations between Bill Hayden and myself is, if you like, a consolidation of what I have said in the Parliament before I left. The development that has taken place since I have been here, is that I have had the opportunity of further briefings, which further confirms the evidence that I had the opportunity to see together with Mr Hayden in Canberra before I left Australia.

WILLESEE: I gather that security surrounding you personally is unusually strong.

PM: It seems to be fairly substantial. I can't recall, comparing security that has been operating when I have been before, whether it is significantly greater. I am not trying to fudge the issue, I just really don't know. I don't personally look into these security questions. I have extreme confidence in the competence of my own people and their relations with their counterparts in countries that we visit.

WILLESEE: In view of what you know now about the role of some of Libyan People's Bureaus around the world, are you now concerned about the presence in Canberra of a Libyan bureau?

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PM: You will appreciate that in January, Mike, when trouble arose previously, we responded positively to the request of the United States to take some action that reduced the level of representation of the Bureau. Obviously, we will be watching with this situation very closely, as indeed I believe other countries in other parts of the world are.

WILLESEE: Prime Minister, you went to Washington originally to talk about trade and especially with regard to agricultural exports.

PM: Not only originally, but that has remained my central task and responsibility.

WILLESEE: Briefly, have you had any result with discussions at this stage?

PM: I am glad you have come to the central purpose of the mission. I can say to my friends in rural Australia that we have received a very positive response from the President down, all people concerned. There is a recognition that Australia is an efficient producer of agricultural, that we are non-subsidising of our exports and that we don't deserve to be hurt, affected adversely by any action which the United States undertakes against the impact of the Europeans. And so what we have confirmed and built upon the work originally done by Mr Dawkins by Mr Dawkins earlier in the year here, we have created a clear framework of consultation and capacity for discussion with the United States so that we can consistently now put into those who are making decisions about the implementation of their own programs, we can put into them our concerns. So we have got that. Secondly, we have the unequivocal agreement of the President and others here that they will take a lead in trying to ensure that in the multi-lateral trade negotiations which commence later this year, that they will make every attempt to have agriculture right up there on the agenda so that together we can try and bring about a situation where the present corruption of international trade in agricultural products would gradually be brought to an end.

WILLESEE: How confident are you that that will happen?

PM: I am totally confident, Mike, that the United States will take the lead in this. That together we will attempt to produce that result in the rounds. We have to realistically acknowledge that there will be some opposition to having agriculture up front like that in some quarters, including at least some of the Europeans. But we have got to do is to try and get across an understanding that this corruption of the international Australian agriculture is not merely against the interests of efficient producers like Australia but it is fundamentally against the interests of the Europeans themselves because the misallocation of resources which is involved in the vast millions of dollars into the subsidisation of agriculture means that they have got a misallocation of resources, which means that there is something

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PM cont: like a million and a half less Europeans in employment than there otherwise would be. It means their growth rate is less than it otherwise would be. They are paying, the ordinary people of Europe, are paying a very high price for this policy of the CAP. And we have got to get that message across.

WILLESEE: Prime Minister, thanks very much for your time.

PM: Thanks Mike.

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