

S.O. 30

Hon. Gerald Regan (Minister of State (International Trade)): Mr. Speaker, the subject matter that has been brought before the House in this emergency debate is one of great importance and is of considerable gravity. It involves a circumstance, indeed a series of circumstances that are alien to what we have been accustomed to for the most part in this hemisphere. I would want to agree with the previous speakers to the extent that the matter is grave, but note that there is a very sharp divergence of opinion between the positions taken by the New Democratic Party, as very articulately expressed by its Leader, and the position taken by the Conservative Party.

I want to begin with something that I consider to be very important. The safety of Canadian citizens who, for one reason or another, found themselves in Grenada at the time of these happenings must be and is my prime responsibility and concern. Since the beginning of the weekend, the Minister of State for External Relations (Mr. Pepin) and I have laboured constantly, often with considerable frustration, to extricate our citizens from the position in which they find themselves in Grenada. In relation to those efforts, I want to say that they have led to many difficulties and much frustration for many worthy foreign service officers. I want to pay tribute to officials at External Affairs here in Ottawa, Washington and in Barbados who, with little sleep, have sought to find their way through the web of military confusion that exists in Grenada in relation to helping our people leave the island.

I want to say also that the Secretary of State for External Affairs (Mr. MacEachen), who is on a very important mission in the Middle East, has stayed in contact with the situation through reports on numerous occasions each day.

The military actions I have referred to, of course, make it very difficult to communicate with Grenada because the American occupied zone is under a military commander who has priorities other than civilian traffic. There are many contradictions. We have received incorrect information on a number of occasions, and indeed to the best of the information that we can discern there is a considerable amount of scattered fighting that is still going on in areas of the island that are by no means safe.

There is no question that under such circumstances the military authorities have priorities and have their preoccupations. I believe all of those have conspired against us. I am able to report to you, Mr. Speaker, that our latest indications are that all Canadians known to be on the island are safe.

Mr. Forrestall: How about the others?

Mr. Regan: We have no indication or reason to believe that they are in any imminent danger.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Regan: We have confirmation that two Canadians have been airlifted to the United States, to South Carolina, but we are uncertain as to the exact time at which other Canadians will be able to leave the island.

We have a Canadian Armed Forces Hercules at Barbados. That aircraft has sought for the past 24 hours—longer than that, quite a few hours since the invasion—permission to land in Grenada. First we had another aircraft in mind but this one has been available to go in. We sought and finally during the night obtained permission for that aircraft to fly in today to bring out the Canadians. The aircraft finally received a time this afternoon, flew to Grenada, circled, but was unable to land. I can only report that probably for understandable reasons relating to the military operations, there is a state of high confusion in the operation of the airfield on Grenada. The aircraft was forced to return to Barbados without any passengers. We are in contact with a high source in Washington indicating our grave concern in this matter. We are confident that the Canadians who are still on the island will be airlifted from there tomorrow.

I want to say that the information that we have from the American sources indicates that Canadians had assembled and have assembled in the area of the airport, but we are unable to get any confirmation of earlier reports that a great number of them have been brought out on American aircraft.

I would like to review briefly the past events on Grenada which began to unfold from October 14. The position of this Government was that we were concerned about the political orientation of Grenada under the late Prime Minister Bishop since the coup of 1979 which overthrew the unpopular Government of Sir Eric Gairy. However, Canadian relations were maintained. There was dialogue. There was contact. Our Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) asserted the rights of countries to determine their own internal affairs, as long as they did not meddle abroad, at the St. Lucia Commonwealth heads of Government meeting in February. I want to say that we adhere to that belief. I think that there can be only the growth of uncertainty and grave danger for peace if we all assume the idea that, because a country has a government of a type of which we do not approve, there is the right for military intervention to change that type of government.

If I may move on, there was shock and dismay at the brutal assassination of Prime Minister Bishop and his many political colleagues and supporters. The situation from the Canadian point of view was monitored as closely as possible, particularly in relation to the safety of Canadians, by the first secretary of the Canadian High Commission, Joe Knockaert, who was in Grenada on aid business. He, with the help of members of CIDA co-operants, especially Allan Bodey, established contact with as many Canadians as possible with a view to calming them and making possible evacuation arrangements. Those events were made extremely difficult by the rigid "shoot-on-sight" curfew. Nevertheless, the contacts were carried out in safety.

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It was not possible to carry out an evacuation of the Canadians as early as we might have desired last weekend because the airport was closed for a period of time during the disorder and confusion as to who was in charge on the island.