

Address given by Anthony Eden on the Suez Crisis (London, 31 October 1956)

Caption: In an address to the House of Commons on 31 October 1956, the British Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, comments on the events taking place in the Suez region.

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Speech by Anthony Eden (31 October 1956)

The Prime Minister (Sir Anthony Eden): In view of my right hon. Friend's announcement that there will be a further debate tomorrow, I will, if I may, confine myself today to giving certain facts about the situation which are available to us and to meeting certain of the criticisms which may be in the minds of the House.

I will begin by saying this about the United Nations session. Yesterday morning, the United States representative tabled at U.N.O. a resolution which was, in effect, a condemnation of Israel as the aggressor in the events of the last few days. We felt that we could not associate ourselves with this and we said so through diplomatic channels both in London and in New York. Her Majesty's Government did not feel, and do not feel, that it is possible to pronounce in this way against one of the parties in the dispute for the action which they have taken, regardless of the cumulative effects that went before.

Throughout recent months, and, in particular, since the seizure of the Canal, the Egyptian Government have kept up a violent campaign against Israel, against this country and against the West. The Egyptian Government have made clear over and over again, with increased emphasis since the seizure of the Canal, their intention to destroy Israel, just as they have made it plain that they would drive the Western Powers out of the Middle East. [An HON. MEMBER: "What has happened?"] That is what has been happening and that is the background to understand what is happening. It is from these Egyptian policies that much of the present crisis has sprung, and to ignore them is to shun reality.

In these circumstances, is there any Member of this House who can consider Egypt as an innocent country whom it is right to exonerate at the Security Council by condemning Israel as an aggressor? Moreover, the Security Council resolution simply called upon the Israeli Government to withdraw within their frontiers. That seemed, and seems, to us in all the circumstances that have preceded these immediate events, to be a harsh demand if it is to stand alone. It certainly could not be said to meet in any way the guarantees for Israel's security which were asked for by several hon. Members in the course of yesterday's debate. As to our own request, to both sides, to cease fire and to withdraw, Israel accepted that request last night and declared her willingness to take practical steps to carry it out. The Egyptian Government rejected it. [HON. MEMBERS: "What did you expect?"]

As to the military situation on the ground, I must give the House what information is at our disposal. The Press this morning, the House will have seen, reports that one column of Israeli troops yesterday morning reached El Quseima, which is one of the biggest Egyptian bases in North Sinai, in an outflanking movement from Nakhel. To the best of our knowledge, this is true. I can confirm also what my right hon. and learned Friend said last night in reply to the right hon. and learned Member for Montgomery (Mr. C. Davies) that, so far as our information goes, Israeli troops are continuing to advance towards the Canal.

The Press also reports that a column is now well along the highway built by Lord Allenby's forces in the First World War. This highway leads through the desert to Ismailia. Other columns are reported to be nearer the Canal. Some troops may already be on it. The latest report is that they are approaching the Canal, and there are a number of details on the tape since, which hon. Members will have seen, within the last hour. A number of prisoners have been captured, I understand.

In the light of all these facts, can anyone say that we and the French Government should have waited — [HON. MEMBERS: "Yes."] — for a satisfactory resolution by the Security Council authorising definite action to stop the fighting? I must remind the House that we have recently been to the United Nations and we went with proposals for the future of the Canal, approved by 18 Powers representing more than 90 per cent. of the traffic that uses the Canal.

Admittedly, we received strong support for our proposals, but they were vetoed by the Soviet Government. Can we be expected to await the development of similar procedures in the situation of much greater urgency that confronts us now in and about the Canal? The action we had to take was bound to be rapid. I regret it had to be so, but it was inescapable.

We have no desire whatever, nor have the French Government, that the military action that we shall have to take — [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh.”] — should be more than temporary in its duration, but it is our intention that our action to protect the Canal and separate the combatants should result in a settlement which will prevent such a situation arising in the future. If we can do that we shall have performed a service not only to this country, but to the users of the Canal.

It is really not tolerable that the greatest sea highway in the world, one on which our Western life so largely depends, should be subject to the dangers of an explosive situation in the Middle East which, it must be admitted, has been largely created by the Egyptian Government along familiar lines. I would remind the House that we have witnessed, all of us, the growth of a specific Egyptian threat to the peace of the Middle East. Everybody knows that to be true.

In the actions we have now taken we are not concerned to stop Egypt, but to stop war. None the less, it is a fact that there is no Middle Eastern problem at present which could not have been settled or bettered but for the hostile and irresponsible policies of Egypt in recent years, and there is no hope of a general settlement of the many outstanding problems in that area so long as Egyptian propaganda and policy continues its present line of violence.

What would the future of the Middle East have been if, while denouncing Israel, we had done nothing to check these Egyptian actions? The only result would be warfare spreading through the whole area and a great increase in the strength and influence of a dictator's power. In these circumstances, to have taken no action would have been to betray not our interests alone but those of the free world and, above all, of the Middle East itself. To have taken ineffective action would have been a greater betrayal than to have taken no action at all.

We have taken the only action which we could clearly see would be effective in holding the belligerents apart and which would give us some chance to re-establish the peace of the area. In entering the Suez Canal area we are only protecting a vital international waterway. We are also holding — and this is a point I would ask the House to bear in mind — between the combatants the only possible line of division which is practicable for us, because even if it had been fair it would not have been possible to have attempted to establish ourselves upon the armistice line itself. It is an irregular line, with no facilities and no possibility of any limited forces doing anything effective to control it, and, of course, would have been no assistance at all in respect of shipping in the Canal.

Now I wish to say something about our relations with the United States in the matter. The decisions which we and the French Government took were, as I said yesterday, taken on our own account and on our own responsibility. The Government remain convinced that we could have done no other and discharge our national duty. Now, it is, of course, an obvious truth that safety of transit through the Canal, though clearly of concern to the United States, is for them not a matter of survival as it is to us and, indeed, to all Europe and many other lands. Indeed, Mr. Dulles himself made this clear on 28th August, when he said the United States' economy is not dependent upon the Canal. Of course that is true. We must all accept it, and we should not complain about it, but it is equally true that throughout all these months this fact has inevitably influenced the attitude of the United States to these problems, as compared to that of ourselves and France.

If anyone says that on that account we should have held up action until agreement could be reached with the United States as to what to do I can only say that this would have been to ignore what everyone here and in the United States knows to have been different approaches to some of these vital Middle Eastern questions. They know it. We know it. Of course, we deplore it, but I do not think that it can carry with it this corollary, that we must in all circumstances secure agreement from our American ally before we can act ourselves in what we know to be our own vital interests.