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PRESS STATEMENT BY
MARGARET BECKETT, UK FOREIGN SECRETARY, AND JAVIER SOLANA,
EU HIGH REPRESENTATIVE FOR CFSP,
ON THE MIDDLE EAST

(LONDON, JULY 13TH 2006)

UK FOREIGN SECRETARY

Mr Solana and I are gravely concerned about the escalation of the present crisis which now poses a serious threat for both Israel and Lebanon and indeed the wider security of the region. The international community and the UK are all heavily engaged in resolving this crisis. We have both spoken to the Israeli Foreign Minister; and the Prime Minister has spoken to Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora and has expressed his support for Lebanon. He encouraged the Government of Lebanon to act to resolve this crisis.

The Prime Minister and Mr Solana have spoken to Kofi Annan. The United Nations will be sending a team to the region shortly. And my counterparts in the European Union and United States are closely involved.

We urge all parties to do all they can to address this crisis and to prevent the situation from worsening. We strongly support the UN's efforts to arrange as quickly as possible a cease-fire and the release of the abducted soldiers.

We call for the urgent release of the kidnapped Israeli soldiers, and an end to attacks on Israeli towns and cities. And we urge all those countries with influence over Hizballah and Hamas to play their part.

Israel has every right to respond to inexcusable acts of provocation. But while Israel is entitled to do what is required to protect its security, it should do so in a way which does not escalate the situation and which is proportionate and measured, conforms to international law, and avoids civilian deaths and suffering.

I should also add that for our part, the British Government is also deeply concerned about the safety of British nationals who are currently in Lebanon.

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EU HIGH REPRESENTATIVE FOR CFSP

Thank you very much, Margaret.

Let me start by saying that I have spent a day in London and I want to thank the hospitality of the government. I had the opportunity to meet with the Prime Minister, with the Secretary of State, with the Minister of Defence and I think it has been a very productive day after the day that we had together in Paris yesterday with the members of the G5 + 1 where we discussed the Iranian situation.

On the question that Margaret Beckett has raised, I would like to say that I agree completely with her. I would like to show my concern about the gravity of the situation. I can tell you that I have spent practically all the night on the telephone with several important actors, including Israel, the Palestinians, and the Lebanon. I have had a very solid friendship for many years with Prime Minister Siniora and I spoke on the phone with him I don't know how many times during the night and this morning.

I talked with the UN Secretary-General and, as has been said already, the mission that is going to be sent by the United Nations in order to find a cease-fire if possible, we support it completely. I would like to know that after the contact that I have had with so many people who are active in the region I am considering the possibility of going to the region after the G8 meeting to see if we can also help to find a solution to this grave crisis.

I would like to also urge both sides to de-escalate and to do the maximum to respect civilian lives, to behave according to international law and to act in a proportional manner. I would go on to say that the government of Lebanon, in particular the Prime Minister, should not be weakened. It is a government which is important for the region which has worked very well and we would like very much that that government will have the opportunity to continue doing their work. I know that the situation is very difficult for them but I make an appeal that it is a government which should not be weakened by the international community.

Thank you very much once again, Margaret, for your hospitality and we have a lot of things to do together and we continue the work.

UK FOREIGN SECRETARY

Indeed.

QUESTION (VOICE OF AMERICA PERSIAN SERVICE)

During the present problems in Lebanon, do you see the hand of the regime in Tehran in this? And do you think that in view of their deliberate non-co-operation with the nuclear issue that they are using this affair as diverting attention from the nuclear problem?

UK FOREIGN SECRETARY

Well certainly there are many who are involved in a variety of ways in the situation in the Middle east who do claim to see an Iranian influence and of course we are all conscious of the fact of Iran's links with Hizbollah and indeed claims of their links with Hamas. I think that the important thing is that whatever those relationships and whatever the source, or the influences, on the crisis in the region, I think the really important thing is that the international community as a whole, all of whom I think it would be fair to say are deeply anxious about this crisis and the way that it is developing, does whatever we can to counter whatever lies behind these different steps and to try to bring the crisis down and begin to resolve it so that we can return to the path of proper peaceful negotiation.

EU HIGH REPRESENTATIVE FOR CFSP

We don't have any proof of the participation of any particular country but I would like to say that whoever has influence in trying to calm the situation has an obligation to do it and we make an appeal in that direction.

QUESTION (REETA CHAKRABARTI, BBC NEWS)

One of the EU Commissioners, speaking privately, has said that he thinks the Israeli response has been disproportionate. Can I ask you both would you agree that Israel's response has been disproportionate? And one question to Mrs Beckett. You talked about fears for Britons in Lebanon, what sort of advice are you giving to them?

UK FOREIGN SECRETARY

First of all Javier can answer for himself but you will have to forgive me but I am afraid that when I am told that people are reported to have said things but they have said them in private, it is difficult enough knowing what people have said when they are reported in public without getting drawn into suggestions of what they might have said in private. I just repeat that we have urged, we do urge, we continue to urge the Israelis and all those involved to act in ways which are proportionate, that is I think the important thing.

With regard to British nationals we have activated our contingency plans. We are advising against all but essential travel to Lebanon and we have talked to the Syrian authorities who have agreed that they will issue visas at the border to British nationals wishing to leave Lebanon. So we are beginning to activate the support structures that we have to help deal with those problems.

EU HIGH REPRESENTATIVE FOR CFSP

I have nothing to add to what Mrs Beckett has said.
