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AKINBI (667)

British Embassy,
Havana.

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No. 52
(1011/62)

My Lord,

Any record of the story of these first two weeks of the Cuban crisis must necessarily read more like a wildly improbable sequel to "Our Man in Havana" than a Foreign Office despatch. Indeed I doubt whether a month ago any reputable publisher would have given a moment's consideration to a story in which Soviet Russia was to be credited with shipping some four dozen assorted giant missiles, each one longer than a cricket pitch, across the Atlantic to Cuba, where, Russian military technicians disguised as agricultural advisers would set them up in secret on launching sites - some of them just off the main road less than 50 miles from Havana. Certainly no publisher could have accepted a Chapter II in which less than a week later the same missiles were being feverishly dismantled, packed up and re-shipped back across the Atlantic. Yet this in brief is precisely what seems to be happening.

2. As observers, we in Havana have been curiously isolated in the tense, unnatural calm of the eye of the cyclone which has so shaken the world. But I am nevertheless taking this first opportunity of available safe hand to submit for Your Lordship's consideration some early impressions which may perhaps serve as marginal comment to the Cuban crisis.

3. Whilst we in Cuba were as unprepared for the breaking of the storm as was the rest of the world it would

The Right Honourable
The Earl of Home,
etc., etc., etc.

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not be true to say that it came out of a clear sky. Most Cubans have now been waiting - some hopefully some fearfully - for at least 2 years for "something to happen". All this time we have lived in an atmosphere of the wildest rumours ninety per cent of them totally without foundation and many of them specifically about gigantic nuclear missiles. Intelligence agencies must therefore be excused if they tended to discount the hundreds of recent rocket stories from their usually unreliable sources. The arrival of much of the Russian equipment, the daily movements of technicians, of the sand and cement, all this was cheerfully accounted for by the generally accepted fact that the Russians were known to be busy building ground to air rocket sites all over the country. What we did not see anything of until too late was the vital equipment and the larger missiles which were almost certainly moved only by night. In fact we saw no rockets of any kind in or around Havana until the 25th of October when a convoy of several ground to air missiles appeared in the city itself in daylight and larger ones, presumably ground to ground missiles, after dark. This was perhaps significant of a relaxation of security precautions in a frantic last minute rush before the machine went into reverse with Khrushchev's order for withdrawal on the 28th of October. After several days delay, when dismantling was presumably going on at the sites, activity on the road began again and there has been no lack of evidence of a hurried evacuation to the ports. Loaded ships have been seen leaving and on the 5th of November a Russian passenger ship left Havana crowded with technicians. It is of course still too early to say whether evacuation is partial or complete.

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4. My own early disbelief, shared by most of my colleagues, was based on the contention, which I still hold to be true, that Castro's first principle in all his thinking and doing has been to survive and "defend the Revolution". It was consequently our opinion, and we thought it was also Castro's opinion, that the installation of offensive missiles in Cuba was the one thing that would justify United States invasion. It would also, incidentally, lose him the support of all South American governments. It seemed to us axiomatic at that time that with offensive rockets based in Cuba he could not survive as "maximum leader" and this country could not survive as a Soviet satellite. We therefore believed that neither Castro nor Khrushchev would consider such a move. The results of photographic reconnaissance of mid-October showed just how wrong we had been. Although we still do not know exactly where our reasoning went astray it seems probable that the fault lay in not realising how high the stakes were that Khrushchev was prepared to play for.

5. On Monday, October 22 following President Kennedy's announcement of the United States decision to impose a quarantine on Cuba, this country was declared by Commander-in-Chief Fidel Castro to be on a war footing. Strangely enough a record of subsequent significant happenings inside this island would scarcely fill a short paragraph. Indeed it was not until the end of the first week after swift and dramatic decisions had been taken daily in Washington, New York and Moscow with President Kennedy and Mr. Khrushchev playing

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the leading roles and delegates to the United Nations, the Organisation of American States and even Lord Russell filling in minor parts that Fidel Castro managed to climb back into the act. He did so with the announcement of his so-called "Five points", five conditions - of which one is the evacuation of Guantánamo - which he demanded should be met within the framework of the Kennedy/Khrushchev agreement. These five points were subsequently nailed to the mast to the accompaniment of a massive propaganda exercise with meetings, resolutions, pamphlets, posters and full orchestration by press and radio. They are still there nailed to the mast, drooping a little for lack of interest, with apparently nobody but Castro taking them very seriously. I, myself, shall not be surprised if they give us all and particularly Mr. Mikoyan, a lot of trouble. However unrealistic they may seem to most people, it is not in Castro's nature to allow them to be pushed on one side. Meanwhile we have had a 2-day visit by U Thant and his United Nations delegation for discussions with the Cuban Government which were officially described by both sides as "friendly and useful". (A report of these discussions was made to the nation by Castro in a remarkable broadcast of which I have more to say in paragraph 8.) And finally we have with us now in Havana Mr. Mikoyan, who is thought to have brought with him a large pocketful of prizes and presents for good behaviour. No account of these obviously immensely important discussions with Fidel Castro has yet been made public as we enter the third week of the crisis.

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6. Partly no doubt because Cuba has thus been so firmly excluded from taking a hand in the shaping of her own destiny, life here, in spite of the acute underlying tension, has been relatively undramatic. This can also partly be explained by the government's efforts to keep the temperature down and to encourage business as usual in industry and agriculture, both of which have been hard hit by the mobilisation of the militia. (As the crisis drags on this will become a factor of immense, perhaps decisive importance in an already shaky economy.) But I think equally important ingredients in what Castro proudly refers to as "discipline and dignified calm" are the stunned confusion and anxiety of the general public, which has shown itself remarkably unenthusiastic about dying for the cause. Added to which two weeks of windy, wet weather have done nothing to help maintain revolutionary ardour amongst militia on guard duties and in flooded fox holes on the beaches. The hard core of both the new and the old style communists are probably still just as ready to fight and sacrifice themselves as ever before - but they would, I believe at this moment be on their own.

7. The same calm has, I am glad to say, prevailed amongst the British colony both white and coloured. There has so far been no signs of, and indeed no reason for discrimination against ourselves or the nationals of any other country. An early interest in the possibility of evacuation has subsided as it became evident that if it was a nuclear war we were heading for, Cuba was perhaps a better place to be in than Britain.

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8. It may seem strange to those outside Cuba that nowhere in the whole country was there an attempt to rise in protest against the government when it was learnt that the revolution had been betrayed and the Cuban fatherland ruthlessly cast in the role of a convenient launching pad for the exclusive use of the Soviet Union. The short answer to this is that in spite of a much improved service by the Voice of America many people, perhaps the majority of people, in this country do not even now know what the main issue has been. For ten days no indication of its true nature was given in the local press or on the radio. Castro had called the country to arms to defend itself against threatened invasion and against an embargo described as an "inhuman blockade instituted by war-mongering imperialist Yankees and designed to starve and bring to their knees the peace loving Cuban people". It was not until Castro's broadcast speech of the 1st of November that the majority of Cubans learnt for the first time of the existence of offensive rockets in their country and even then they were referred to merely as "strategic weapons". (No mention at all, incidentally, has yet been made of the Russian medium range bombers.) They also learnt at this juncture that the weapons in question were owned and manned by Russian military technicians, that the Soviet Union had decided to withdraw them, and that there had been differences of opinion between the Cuban and Soviet Governments. By now however the relief generally felt, if not publicly expressed, at moving a step or two back from the brink of a nuclear war was in itself sufficient to take the sharp edge off any immediate urge

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to complain, much less to resist or revolt. Indeed what could they be expected to do in their leaderless confusion in a country where the organs of security have gone from strength to strength in the past year. The Cuban people, like other peoples all over the world, were no doubt happy at this particular moment in history to settle for any available solution which would avoid a nuclear war, however unsatisfactory they would regard that solution in normal circumstances.

9. I believe that considerable credit for checking the drop in the nation's morale must be given to Fidel Castro himself. His unprecedentedly short broadcast speech of the 1st of November - it was only 1½ hours long - was a remarkable tour de force. It was delivered by an obviously tired, humiliated Castro fighting to reassert his leadership and he drew on all his astonishing reserves of strength, his lawyer's astuteness and his passionate oratory. With his back to the wall he showed himself desperate but determined, often most convincing when his argument was most dishonest. Bloody his head certainly was but it was unbowed and I could not help feeling that if the counter revolution could throw up a leader of half his weight - preferably without his paranoic tendencies - victory might well be theirs.

10. These are early impressions and I would not care at this moment to have to assess exactly how deep and how permanent the effects of this speech are likely to be: nor for that matter would I yet wish to estimate how much morale has been damaged by the crisis as a whole. The shock to the Cuban nation with its inflated sense of "dignidad", and

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particularly to that prima donna of prima donnas Fidel Castro himself, must have been tremendous. To discover in the early stages of an 18 round contest that you are not even one of the contestants but only the prize money is not an easily forgotten experience for a sensitive young nation. But better to be humiliated than wiped out and I do not think it impossible that with the help of an extensive propaganda campaign showing how Khrushchev has saved the peace of the world both Castro and the Cuban nation will very soon regain confidence in their international sponsor the U.S.S.R. and be able to convince themselves that all has been for the best. Indeed I find it depressingly easy to imagine a sequence of events developing from the present situation which could be highly satisfactory to the present regime. A United States guarantee not to invade seems certain; a Soviet promise to increase aid seems likely; a Soviet plan to underwrite Cuba economically and build it into a Caribbean show-piece instead of a military base is a possibility. In these circumstances it is difficult to foresee what forces would unseat the present regime. Castro himself, whom I still believe must be the key figure for some time to come, will have to work through an agonising period of readjustment. But this is not beyond a man who has already on several occasions shown a remarkable talent for survival.

10. Already our counter revolutionary contacts have forgotten the threat of a nuclear war and are disappointed and dispirited at the non-appearance of the United States marines and the waning prospect of a Castro-free Cuba.

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This is the first time in over two years that I have felt able to agree with them in their assessment of the probable future. There is however some comfort in the thought that with so much still only in embryo we could all be quite wrong.

11. I am copying this despatch to Her Majesty's Representatives at Washington, Moscow and all Latin American posts and to the United Kingdom High Commissioner, Jamaica.

I have the honour to be,
with the highest respect,
My Lord,
Your Lordship's obedient Servant.

Henry and Louis