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LETTER DATED 11 FEBRUARY 1976 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE  
OF FRANCE TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF  
THE SECURITY COUNCIL

On 4 February, the French delegation, acting on the instructions of its Government, addressed a letter to you, issued as document S/11961, in which it informed you that a serious incident had occurred on 4 February at the post of Loyada situated on the frontier between the French Territory of the Afars and the Issas and the Somali Republic. The French forces which were engaged in freeing a bus in which 30 children were being held hostage were fired on by heavy weapons from the Somali territory. They were obliged to react in order to protect themselves and the children. On the instructions of my Government, I requested you to convene a meeting of the Security Council as a matter of extreme urgency for the purpose of considering that serious incident.

However, since the incident did not lead to any immediate consequences and the situation on the spot returned to normal, we felt it was not necessary for the Council to convene immediately. We did, however, specify in the consultations which you initiated that we reserved the right to ask you to act on our request if circumstances should so require.

On 5 February, the Somali delegation, noting an alleged aggression committed by French forces against the post of Loyada, brought the details of the matter before the Council in its letter circulated as document S/11969.

On 10 February, in a second letter circulated as document S/11974, that same delegation repeated its accusation and furnished a list of Somali nationals allegedly killed or wounded during the incident of 4 February.

The French delegation rejects absolutely the accusation of aggression. In order to dissipate any ambiguity, it deems it necessary to present a detailed account of the events surrounding the incident in question.

On Tuesday, 3 February, at 7 a.m., four armed terrorists, claiming to be members of the Front for the Liberation of the Somali Coast, seized in a suburb of Djibouti 30 children from six to 12 years of age who were on board a school bus. They made an adult charged with accompanying the children get off the bus and forced the driver, by threatening him with their weapons, to run through a police barrier and head for the Somali frontier. As the alarm had been given, inter alia, by the person accompanying the children, police forces immediately set out in pursuit of the vehicle, but it proved impossible for them to catch up with it as the kidnapers were firing at them with automatic weapons.

The road from the spot where the terrorists seized the bus to the Somali frontier is about 15 kilometres long and in bad condition. Before the school bus was able to reach the French frontier post, the personnel guarding it were able to place a car across the road; this car was placed in front of a barrier leading to a no man's land under French sovereignty separating the French post from the Somali post about 250 metres away. The bus was thus forced to stop and was immediately surrounded by reinforcements brought in by helicopter. Before even revealing their intentions the four terrorists demanded that the bus be driven to the middle of the no man's land to a point midway between the two posts. They threatened to kill the children if their demand was not met and they fired several warning shots inside the vehicle to show their determination. As soon as their demand was accepted, they forced the bus driver, again threatening him with their weapons, to place the bus some 10 or 15 metres from the Somali barrier, which is located right on the frontier and parallel to it.

The terrorists then revealed the conditions, which were political in nature, under which they would free the children; they stated that if their demands were rejected, the children would not only be executed, but "their throats would be cut". At the end of the morning of 3 February, Abdullahi Hadj Archi, who calls himself the Vice-President of the Front for the Liberation of the Somali Coast, an organization whose headquarters is in Mogadiscio, claimed that his organization was responsible for the kidnapping of the 30 children. Also in Mogadiscio, another official of the Front confirmed the political demands of the kidnapers to a correspondent of Radio Monte Carlo.

Anxious to avoid any bloodshed, the French authorities endeavoured to negotiate. The French Minister for Foreign Affairs immediately requested the Ambassador of Somalia in Paris to intervene with his Government out of humanitarian considerations. Furthermore, on 3 February the French Ambassador in Mogadiscio asked to be received by Mr. Omar Arteh, the Minister for Foreign Affairs. For 48 hours he was unable to make any contact with the Somali Government. It was not until 5 February at 7 p.m. that he finally was able to see Mr. Omar Arteh.

Throughout the day on 3 February the French authorities who had arrived on the spot from Djibouti tried in vain to establish a dialogue with the four terrorists in the school bus. The latter demanded that the Secretary-General of the Front be present; failing that, they seemed to be awaiting the arrival of other officials of the movement.

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On the morning of 4 February the Somali Consul in Djibouti, who had spent the night at the Somali frontier post, brought before the French officials following the situation at some distance from the bus three messengers from the Front who he said had arrived from Hargeisa. The messengers handed over to those officials a typewritten list recapitulating the political demands of the terrorists in more or less the same terms as they had been formulated by the kidnapers and repeated by the Front's spokesmen in Mogadiscio. They specified that the French Government had 24 hours to comply or else the children would be executed.

When he was asked to intervene as a mediator and for humanitarian reasons, the Consul refused outright, saying that the matter concerned only France and the Front and that he did not wish to be involved in any way.

The French authorities were prepared to let the terrorists cross over into Somali territory if they released the children, but at no time did the kidnapers seem ready to accept that offer. Furthermore the messengers who had come from Hargeisa joined the terrorists in maintaining an armed guard over the bus and the children.

On the afternoon of Wednesday, 4 February, the children's plight was growing more and more serious and their lives seemed gravely threatened by the behaviour of the terrorists, who appeared increasingly nervous. The French authorities decided to take action. Troops were ordered to take up the appropriate positions. Infantry and light armoured cars were arranged around the French post, approximately 200 metres from the school bus. Sharpshooters brought in specially from France were posted under palm trees in front of the post, about 180 metres from the bus.

At exactly 3.45 p.m. five marksmen fired simultaneously and killed four terrorists whose silhouettes were visible in the bus and a fifth who was on the ground behind the bus. A sixth terrorist then rushed from the Somali post; he reached the bus almost at the same time as two French soldiers who had run up from the palm grove to free the children. The sixth terrorist managed to fire a machine-gun volley at the children who had instinctively lain down inside the bus; he killed one and wounded five others as well as a social worker and the bus driver before being killed by one of the soldiers.

In the seconds which followed those shots, while the French soldiers rushed up from the palm grove to save the children, two rapid-fire automatic weapons opened fire from a small woods located in Somali territory to the east of the frontier post. Also at that same moment, several marksmen on the balconies of the Somali frontier post fired at the French soldiers. A French lieutenant was severely wounded. The French forces naturally returned the fire; in a few minutes they silenced the two automatic weapons and the marksmen on the balconies.

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It cannot seriously be claimed that the French forces attacked the village of Loyada, as is stated in the Somali letter in document S/11969: the French forces merely responded to fire directed at them by troops in position on the Somali side of the frontier. It is equally false to claim that "all the buildings" of Loyada were destroyed: eye-witnesses have been able to ascertain that the village is still standing and suffered no damage; this can also be seen from the aerial photographs which I am placing at the disposal of the Council and which were taken on 6 February from a helicopter in French territory. It is also untrue that the French forces abducted Somali customs officials or civilians. No one was taken prisoner. However, when the children were brought back to Djibouti, it was discovered that one of them was missing. It was eventually established that he had been taken across the frontier after the bus had been brought up close to it.

The child was held for several days in northern Somalia by terrorists who claimed to belong to the Front for the Liberation of the Somali Coast (FLCS). Fortunately, he was returned to the French Ambassador in Somalia on 8 February and we are pleased to express our appreciation for the positive contribution of the Somali authorities in securing the child's return.

If Somali civilians were killed or wounded during the brief encounter between French forces and the accomplices of the terrorists stationed on Somali territory, the French authorities deeply regret the loss. Undoubtedly those persons were, unfortunately for them, mixed in with armed elements positioned around the Somali frontier post and in the small woods nearby, positions from which the French forces were attacked by rifle and machine-gun fire. They are the victims of that attack and of the response which necessarily followed. France rejects any accusation of aggression in this regard.

I should be grateful if you would have this letter circulated as an official document of the Security Council.

(Signed) L. de GUIRINGAUD  
Ambassador of France  
Permanent Representative  
to the United Nations

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