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LETTER DATED 9 APRIL 1976 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

Acting under instructions from my Government, I have the honour to refer to the Icelandic Permanent Representative's letter of 1 April to you (S/12035). The United Kingdom Government totally reject the allegations contained in that letter about "British aggression in Icelandic waters".

Since the expiry on 13 November 1975 of the 1973 Anglo-Icelandic Interim Fisheries Agreement, vessels of the Icelandic coastguard have harassed British trawlers fishing lawfully on the high seas off Iceland. They have seriously disrupted fishing on numerous occasions and have cut the trawl wires of British trawlers on 29 occasions, resulting in the complete loss of gear in approximately half of these cases.

As I explained to the Security Council on 16 December 1975 (S/PV.1866), it was in response to this Icelandic aggression that the United Kingdom Government sent civilian defence vessels to the fishing grounds in the third week of November 1975. But it became clear by 25 November that these vessels were unable to fend off the coastguard unaided and the United Kingdom Government felt bound to order the Royal Navy, supported by the Royal Air Force, to provide protection for our trawlers.

The role of the frigates is purely defensive. They have orders to interpose themselves between the Icelandic coastguard vessels and British trawlers in order to protect the latter. It is the Icelandic coastguard vessels which have been behaving in an aggressive manner in their attempts to reach the British trawlers by manoeuvring dangerously close to the British frigates. The coastguard vessels have also several times deliberately collided with British frigates in complete disregard for the safety of the ships concerned. By 6 April there had been some 31 collisions between the coastguard vessels and British frigates.

There are normally four Royal Naval frigates on station which have to defend a varying number of trawlers in an area of several thousand square miles. The frigates have one Royal Fleet Auxiliary and one Royal Maritime Auxiliary Service tug in support. During the first few days of April an extra frigate has been on station whilst the protected fishing area has been moved, in accordance with the normal pattern of fishing, from the north-east to the north-west of Iceland, but this arrangement is only temporary.

Iceland has added two converted trawlers, the Baldur and the Ver, to her coastguard forces. The Icelandic Permanent Representative's letter contrasts the size and speed of our frigates with those of the Icelandic coastguard vessels. It is true that the latter are smaller than the frigates, but they are more manoeuvrable and in some cases have shown themselves capable of inflicting serious damage on Her Majesty's ships by their aggressive tactics. If defensive protection is to be provided, our defence vessels must have the speed to interpose themselves between the coastguard gunboats and the trawlers and the ability to remain on station for considerable periods of time. The task of protecting British trawlers fishing off Iceland is thus one which requires vessels with the speed and sea-keeping of the frigates. It is also a task which the frigates, without the use of their weapons, are obliged to perform with the greatest restraint in the face of continued dangerous harassment from coastguard vessels.

The United Kingdom Government totally deny all Icelandic allegations in the Permanent Representative's letter and elsewhere that collisions between British frigates and Icelandic coastguard vessels have occurred as a result of a policy of deliberate ramming by Her Majesty's ships. Our frigates in no way seek to ram the coastguard vessels: they are not designed for such action and this is reflected in their orders. In the case of the collisions on 27 March between HMS Diomede and Baldur for instance, the Icelandic allegations are totally inconsistent with the facts, which are as follows:

At 1330 on 27 March the Icelandic coastguard vessel Baldur started to approach British trawlers fishing on the high seas. HMS Diomede interposed herself between Baldur and the trawlers and a period of close quarters manoeuvring developed. Baldur continually attempted to swing her heavy stern into Diomede's side from both sides making 25 attempts in all. At 1449 Baldur turned towards Diomede (which was on a steady course and speed) from starboard, and a collision occurred. Baldur's stern hit Diomede's starboard side and Diomede's side hit Baldur's port bridge wing.

Baldur's aggressive manoeuvring continued and she engineered two further collisions at 1518 and 1525 by swinging her stern into Diomede's port side. A fourth collision occurred in the same manner at 1540 when Baldur's stern severely gouged Diomede's port side. These collisions caused serious damage to Diomede including a four metre by one metre gash in her port side.

Following these collisions HMS Galatea came to Diomede's assistance. As a precautionary measure her armaments were manned for a time but at no stage did Galatea issue any threat to open fire. The United Kingdom Government have already formally rejected the allegation made by the Icelandic authorities that the frigate Bacchante entered Iceland's territorial waters on 30 March. At 1252 HMS Bacchante was in position 65 degrees 14'N, 13 degrees 17'W, i.e. 6.4 miles from Icelandic coastal baselines and outside Icelandic territorial waters. At no time was HMS Bacchante any nearer to the Icelandic coast or coastal baselines.

The imputation made in the Icelandic Representative's letter that the "sole intent" of the frigates is "of creating and provoking incidents in the first place

possibly to sink one of the (Icelandic) ships ..." is entirely false. The role of the British defence vessels has already been made clear to the Council in my statement of 16 December 1975 (S/PV.1866) and in this letter. Their presence is solely defensive, to protect unarmed British trawlers on the high seas against illegal harassment by the Icelandic coastguard who are seeking to impose unilaterally declared fishing limits by force.

I have the honour to request that this letter be circulated as an official document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Ivor RICHARD