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THE SITUATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

SECURITY COUNCIL
Fortieth year

Letter dated 24 July 1985 from the Permanent Representative
of the United States of America to the United Nations
addressed to the Secretary-General

The Government of the United States has studied with concern and regret the letter dated 5 July 1985 from the Permanent Representative of Lebanon addressed to you (A/40/462-S/17325 and Corr.1). The letter transmitted a note from the Government of Lebanon that in our view unfairly criticizes the efforts of the United States to end the increasingly flagrant and tragic use of Beirut International Airport by hijackers of civilian aircraft.

The Lebanese letter revealed serious misunderstanding of United States policies and goals on this issue. The Government of the United States believes that all countries sharing our anxiety over the insecurity rampant at this busy aviation facility, including Lebanon, should associate themselves with our initiative.

The following factors are crucial to an understanding of this matter:

(a) The aim of the Government of the United States in bringing this problem to the attention of the world community is not to punish the Government of Lebanon, the Lebanese people, or Middle East Airlines. Far from wishing to add to the burdens of those who live and work in that conflict-ravaged country, our goal is to improve security at the Beirut International Airport and end the abuse to which it has been subjected.

* A/40/150.

(h) Beirut International Airport has now undeniably become a haven for hijackers attacking the civilian aircraft of many nations, not only those of the United States. This year alone there have been six hijackings involving the Beirut Airport. Over the past 15 years, there have been 36 such incidents. While the latest attack was against a plane belonging to TWA, others were on non-American aircraft, including Arab-owned planes. Nowhere else have air pirates enjoyed such a permissive atmosphere, whether or not condoned by the local authorities. Air pirates have moved with total freedom to and from hijacked aircraft landed at Beirut. They have obtained reinforcements and disappeared at will into the surrounding Beirut suburbs.

(c) We welcome and are encouraged by actions recently announced by the Government of Lebanon to meet these deficiencies, including its reported intention to prosecute individuals identified as the hijackers of the TWA plane. However, the necessary measures go beyond those announced to date. It is unclear whether the will and the means exist to implement successfully the steps that have been outlined, given the turbulent situation that regrettably has prevailed in Beirut and its surroundings.

(d) The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) has established standards of security for airports, and international conventions have set standards of behaviour for Governments toward hijackings. Lebanon has accepted these standards and is a party to these conventions. The Government of Lebanon has not yet demonstrated that it can enforce its commitments effectively or on a sustained basis. The United States is engaged in a dialogue with Lebanon and other concerned States on how best to correct this situation, preferably by collective action.

(e) Meanwhile, our initiative seeking to close Beirut International Airport to terrorism and hijacking should be understood as a necessary first step in the corrective process. The need for urgent action along these lines is clear. The blatant abuse of this facility by those who attack international civil aviation must be stopped. What we have proposed is entirely consistent with international law.

The Government of the United States looks forward to continued discussions with the Government of Lebanon and other Governments toward the ends outlined above. We are certain that all people anxious to protect travellers and preserve peaceful commerce among nations share these goals.

I request that you have this letter circulated as an official document of the General Assembly, under item 38 of the provisional agenda, and of the Security Council.

(Signed) Vernon A. WALTERS