

CABLEGRAM DATED 30 JUNE 1948 FROM THE UNITED NATIONS MEDIATOR  
ADDRESSED TO THE SECRETARY-GENERAL CONCERNING THE  
LST "ALTALENA" INCIDENT

For President Security Council:

"For the information of the Security Council, I have the honour to report that following my incident report of 23 June (document S/854) concerning the LST (Landing Ship, Tank) Altalena, I have honour to submit the following further details on basis of reports from United Nations observers.

Ship under Panama flag first spotted by United Nations aerial observer off shore near Nathanya on morning 21 June, at which time it appeared to be unloading boxes resembling ammunition cases. Two United Nations ground observers immediately dispatched. Subsequently a Jewish Colonel informed Colonel Bonds that a boat had come in and offered to take United Nations observers out, but was informed that United Nations observers already sent.

Colonel Bonds himself flew to scene from Haifa about 1.00 p.m. and en route, some six miles south of Nathanya, along the shore, he saw about seventy troops moving south, obscured from view inland. Off shore at Kfar Vitkin he observed a black LST with one bow door open and barge running between pier and ship. Close to pier were trucks loading cases resembling ammunition or rifle cases. Some 200 men in khaki uniforms were around the pier. Some material was stored under the pier. Further inland cases were being dumped in the fields and covered with straw in orchard. Colonel Bonds could find no suitable landing ground.

Another United Nations plane was sent at approximately 9.00 p.m. on 21 June and observed unloading still proceeding. Plane was fired at from the shore.

On the same evening Colonel Bonds was informed that United Nations observers from Tel Aviv had been prevented from entering the area. These observers had proceeded to Nathanya, from which point they had caught sight of the vessel, but when they attempted to make their way toward the ship, they were prevented from doing so by the guards of a road block, who stated that they belonged to the Irgun Zvai Leumi. United Nations representatives at Tel Aviv immediately visited the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Provisional Government and informed him of the experience of the United Nations observers.

The Foreign Minister stated that he would make arrangements with the Jewish Army Headquarters for United Nations observers to proceed to the scene of action. This was at approximately 5.30 p.m., but by 8.30 p.m., despite repeated telephone calls, no reply had been obtained from the Jewish authorities concerning arrangements for the departure of the observers.

At 8.30 p.m. the United Nations representatives were visited by a Jewish Colonel who informed them that the presence of United Nations observers on the scene of operations could not be permitted since the observers could not be allowed to observe the combat technique of the Jewish Army or its equipment. The Colonel was informed that if United Nations observers were prevented from witnessing at first hand the activities at Kfar Vitkin they could not report accurately on the situation.

At 9.00 a.m. on 22 June, both aerial and ground observers were sent to Kfar Vitkin accompanied by a Jewish Liaison Officer. The LST had departed.

The United Nations ground observer reported on his return that he had been prevented from entering the area by regular Jewish forces and was informed that regular Jewish forces had taken over the material which had been offloaded and which would be left where it was.

Reports from United Nations observers at Tel Aviv revealed that about midnight on 21 June the LST was seen approaching the coast of Tel Aviv followed by two patrol vessels. Fire was exchanged between the patrol vessels and the ship, which ran ashore just outside the Hotel Kaek Dan, which is the headquarters for United Nations observers at Tel Aviv.

Apparently nothing more happened until about 1.00 a.m. on the morning of 22 June, when some thirty men were landed from the ship and ran inland. Thereupon firing began in the streets of Tel Aviv between the regular Jewish armed forces and those of Irgun Zvai Leumi.

Further offloading from the ship was subsequently attempted with a small landing craft which had to return to the LST because of heavy fire from the shore. Fire inland was returned from the ship and from Irgun forces along the beach. At approximately 4.00 p.m. on 22 June fire, probably mortar, was directed at the ship from the shore. Three hits were observed, the ship caught fire and minor explosions occurred. An order to abandon ship was apparently given, and about forty men were observed jumping into the water and swimming ashore. The swimmers were constantly under fire from the shore. The buildings in the area, including the Kaek Dan Hotel, were evacuated because of the fire and the danger of explosions from the ship. What happened to the swimmers reaching shore was not observed by the United Nations observers.

The ship continued burning and several minor explosions occurred

/throughout

throughout the night of 22 June and the day of 23 June.

On 25 June an attempt by the Jewish Navy to examine the ship and to remove her from the beach was prevented because of heat and smoke in the ship.

As regards the vital question as to how many men and how much cargo may have been landed from the ship contrary to the terms of the Truce Agreement, Colonel Bonde has presented the following appraisal: according to some reports there may have been tanks on board, but tanks could not have been landed by the small barge which was employed. If tanks were on board they were still there when the ship burned. An Irgun broadcast had stated that a large quantity of bombs was on the ship, but this appears to be greatly exaggerated, since had bombs been on board, explosions would have wrecked the city. The explosions which did occur did not greatly damage the deck of the ship.

The evidence indicates that at Nathanya the Irgun did land war material and that regular Jewish forces took this material over following the surrender of the Irgun forces. It must be assumed that this material remains in the possession of regular Jewish forces. Its quantity is unknown.

It is established that at Tel Aviv there was heavy fighting and that the regular Jewish forces exerted strong efforts to overcome the Irgun operation.

In response to inquiries made by a representative of the United Nations in a letter of 24 June, Mr. Shertok, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Provisional Government of Israel, included the following statements:

1. From the moment the Israeli authorities learned of the arrival of the ship, their primary concern was to prevent the offloading of the arms which they regarded as the chief menace to the Truce.
2. In view of the refusal of the Irgun Zvai Leumi to submit to the authority of the Provisional Government and its readiness to back up this refusal by the use of force, evidenced by the drawing together on the spot of over 400 armed men, it became necessary for the Israeli Army authorities likewise to concentrate a considerable force on the scene of action. This preparation was completed in the forenoon of Monday, June 21st.
3. If immigrants arrived in the 'Altalena', they must have landed and dispersed during the night. When the units of the Israeli Army surrounded and went into action against the rebellious Irgun Zvai Leumi force on Monday at noontime, they found themselves confronted only with local members of the Irgun Zvai Leumi, as was subsequently proved from the list of those who surrendered.
4. In the course of the engagement six Irgun Zvai Leumi members were killed and eighteen wounded. The Israeli Army lost two men killed and six wounded.

5. When the Irgun Zvai Leumi forces at Kfar Vitkin surrendered to the Army on Tuesday morning, all their arms were given up and their names were taken down. They were found in possession only of their personal arms. It was thus proved that the offloading of arms and other war materials reported to have been brought by the ship had not yet started, and the Provisional Government is satisfied that the whole quantity of such arms and war materials was actually consumed by the flames when the 'Altalena' took fire off Tel Aviv.

6. Two vessels of the Israeli Coastal Patrol proceeded to Kfar Vitkin during the night and, when the 'Altalena' tried to escape, tracked her to Tel Aviv.

7. On Tuesday morning units of the Irgun Zvai Leumi were rushed to the shore of Tel Aviv and occupied a few buildings along the beach. They made an attempt to establish contact with the ship. As it was feared that this might result in an attempt to offload the arms by force and after the warning issued had not been heeded, fire was opened on the 'Altalena', as a result of which the vessel went up in flames and a number of Irgun Zvai Leumi men on board and on the shore were killed and wounded.

I am still unable to estimate the number of men who actually got ashore from the ship, the number of men wounded and taken to the hospital, the quantity of war material unloaded and the whereabouts of all this. The appropriate Jewish authorities have been asked for specific information on these points.

Bernadotte"