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TO IMMEDIATE FCO

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INFO PRIORITY ROME, PARIS, THE HAGUE, LUXEMBOURG, BONN, VIENNA,
BERNE, DUBLIN

YOUR TELNO 61 TO ROME : BELGIUM AND THE FRENCH LORRY DRIVERS DISPUTE

1. AN ESTIMATED 1500 TO 2000 BELGIAN LORRY DRIVERS ARE STRANDED IN FRANCE. SOME 180 OF THESE HAVE BEEN STUCK FOR A LONG PERIOD IN THE ALPINE PASSES, INCLUDING 100 IN THE VICINITY OF MONT BLANC.
2. ACCORDING TO THE PRESS THE MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS HAS CHARTERED A BELGIAN AIR FORCE AIRCRAFT. THIS IS REPORTEDLY FLYING TODAY 24 FEBRUARY TO GENEVA WITH WARM CLOTHING AND FOOD FOR STRANDED BELGIAN LORRY DRIVERS. THESE WILL THEN BE DELIVERED BY BELGIAN CONSULAR OFFICIALS. IT WILL ALSO TAKE SOME 30 DRIVERS TO RELIEVE THEIR STRANDED COLLEAGUES. HOWEVER, THE CABINET IN THE MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS SAY IT IS NOT CERTAIN THAT THE AIRCRAFT WILL LEAVE, AS CARRYING ONLY 30 RELIEF DRIVERS MAY NOT BE CONSIDERED ENOUGH TO JUSTIFY THE DESPATCH OF THE AIRCRAFT.
3. THE MFA ISSUED INSTRUCTIONS ON 21 FEBRUARY TO CONSULATES, INCLUDING HONORARY CONSULATES, IN FRANCE, NORTH ITALY AND AUSTRIA, TO PROVIDE HELP TO STRANDED LORRY DRIVERS AND TO ADVANCE MONEY WHERE NECESSARY. THIS IS AGAINST A GUARANTEE OF REPAYMENT PROVIDED BY THE TRANSPORT FEDERATION (IE THE EMPLOYMENT ASSOCIATION). ON 22 FEBRUARY THE BELGIAN CONSUL GENERAL IN MILAN MADE CONTACT WITH BELGIAN DRIVERS ON THE ITALIAN SIDE OF THE BORDER AND SUCCEEDED IN FORMING THEM INTO TWO LARGE GROUPS. NO DRIVERS WERE EVACUATED BUT ARRANGEMENTS WERE MADE TO FLY OUT A SICK CHILD. SOME DRIVERS WHOSE CARGOES WERE NOT PARTICULARLY VALUABLE OR PERISHABLE SUCCEEDED IN PARKING THEIR VEHICLES OFF THE ROAD, APPARENTLY IN FACTORY YARDS, ETC., AND RETURNED BY TRAIN BEFORE THAT BECAME IMPOSSIBLE. THE MFA SAY THAT THERE COULD BE DIFFICULTY IN GETTING SOME OF THE LORRIES GOING AGAIN AS MANY OF THEIR ENGINE BLOCKS ARE FROZEN.

4. THE BELGIAN MINISTER FOR EMPLOYMENT, H. VAN DEN BROEK, HAS TAKEN MEASURES TO ENSURE THAT STRANDED DRIVERS ARE CONSIDERED AS TECHNICALLY UNEMPLOYED. THEY CAN THUS RECEIVE UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS. THE MINISTRY OF TRANSPORT TELL US THAT THE PRINCIPLE PURPOSE HERE IS TO RELIEVE THE STRAIN ON HAULAGE COMPANIES WHO ARE OBLIGED TO PAY SALARIES WHEN THEIR DRIVERS ARE NOT WORKING.

5. I AM TELEGRAPHING SEPARATELY ON PRESS COVERAGE. THERE HAS BEEN SOME CRITICISM THAT THE BELGIAN GOVERNMENT HAS NOT DONE ENOUGH TO HELP THEIR STRANDED DRIVERS. ONE DRIVER WHO SUCCEEDED IN GETTING THROUGH SAID, WHEN INTERVIEWED IN BRUSSELS, THAT THE BRITISH AND THE DUTCH BY COMPARISON HAD DONE FAR MORE. THE OFFICIAL IN THE MFA WHO HAS BEEN COORDINATING THE BELGIAN RELIEF ARRANGEMENTS SPOKE TO US ADMIRINGLY OF THE PANACHE DEMONSTRATED BY OUR CONSULAR OFFICIAL APPARENTLY SHOWN ON BBC TELEVISION NEWS LAST NIGHT (23 FEBRUARY) USING A HELICOPTER TO GET TO BRITISH LORRY DRIVERS.

6. RHIND FROM THE MINISTRY OF TRANSPORT IN LONDON WAS IN TOUCH, VIA THE CONSULATE, WITH THE BELGIAN MINISTRY OF TRANSPORT TO SECURE PERMISSION FOR VARIOUS BRITISH COACH SHUFFLE SERVICES TO BE ROUTED THROUGH BELGIUM INSTEAD OF FRANCE. THIS WAS READILY GIVEN.

7. NO EXTRA LOAD HAS SO FAR FALLEN ON MY CONSULATE AS A RESULT OF THE STRIKE.

JACKSON