

Beat: Local

Documents: Libya warned UK of embassy violence before 84 shooting

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USPA News - The fatal shooting of British policewoman Yvonne Fletcher during a demonstration outside the Libyan embassy in London in April 1984 was preceded by at least two warnings of possible violence from the Libyan government, but British officials allowed the protests to go ahead. The information came to light on Friday when the UK's National Archives released nearly 500 newly declassified documents from the Prime Minister's Office and the Cabinet Office.

They were made public under the so-called 30-year rule that governs the release of classified documents, although the British government is now in the process of transitioning to a 20-year rule. Friday's release shed light on the British government's response to the fatal shooting of 25-year-old policewoman Yvonne Fletcher outside the Libyan embassy in London. The incident happened on April 17, 1984, when an unidentified person on the first floor of the embassy compound opened fire with a submachine gun at Libyan protesters, killing Fletcher and injuring 10 protesters. The files show that British ambassador Oliver Miles was summoned by Libyan officials in Tripoli on the night before the fatal shooting, but the ambassador was clearly not impressed by Libya's threat of violence and even made a bet on the outcome. At least one other threat was also not taken seriously. "I was called to the FLB after midnight on 16/17 April by Hafiana, yet another member of the new FLB committee," Miles wrote in a confidential report to Britain's Foreign Office in the hours before the shooting. It described in detail the exchange that took place between him and Libyan officials. "Reading from an intemperately worded text he said that an anti-Jamahiriyah demonstration was expected outside the People's Bureau (Libyan Embassy) in London [on] 17 April," the ambassador explained. "The Libyan government would not be responsible for the consequences if the demonstration took place and they might include violence. There was a threat to the security of the [People's Bureau]." Miles continued: "I said Britain was a free country and I reminded him that there was a demonstration outside my embassy only a few weeks ago. I said that threats of violence did not impress the British government, at which he withdrew saying that no direct threat was intended. I assured him that we would guarantee the security of the [People's Bureau] and undertook to inform London of his demarche." But the third and final paragraph showed Miles was clearly unimpressed by his early morning meeting with Libyan officials. "I was shown out by the UK desk officer who seemed as little impressed by this performance as I was," Miles said. "I made a bet with him that no such demonstration will take place, grateful to know the outcome." The situation escalated in the early morning as protesters gathered outside the Libyan embassy in London, prompting Libyan officials in Tripoli to summon Miles for a second time to express their concern. He was informed that British police were preventing all entry to and exit from the Libyan embassy compound, and that two embassy staff members had been arrested when they attempted to move barriers that were aimed to control the crowd. "I said that any diplomat who could identify himself as such would be released immediately. If there was interference with freedom of movement in and out of the People's Bureau, this would be remedied," Miles said in his second telegram, which was now marked urgent as the situation had escalated. "I reminded Suweidan that, during the demonstration here (in Tripoli), my staff and I closed all doors and windows and remained invisible in the building and I asked him to instruct the People's Bureau staff similarly to avoid anything which might increase tension," the ambassador wrote. It was Miles' last telegram before the fatal shooting that would eventually help seal Libya's reputation as a rogue state. "There was a very ugly incident at the Libyan People's Bureau (LPB) this morning when shots were fired from the LPB into a crowd of demonstrators," the foreign office wrote in a secret and urgent telegram. "The Home Office are calling a meeting at the Cabinet Office shortly to consider advice to ministers. It seems clear that a recommendation to break off diplomatic relations with the Libyans will emerge." As background information, the foreign office explained that it was first contacted by the Libyan embassy on April 16, asking whether a demonstration was planned because parking meters had been covered. "Having made inquiries we confirmed that the police had authorized a Libyan dissident demonstration but that we were confident that the police would ensure public order and the protection of the LPB," it said. The telegram added that the Libyan embassy called the foreign office again at midnight and a third time on the morning of April 17, expressing Tripoli's "serious view" of the planned demonstration and asking for action to be taken to stop it. "We conveyed this request to the Home Office and the police during the night, drawing attention to the fact that the Libyans were capable of carrying out their threats," it said. But authorities eventually decided to allow the demonstration to go ahead as planned, although the police operation was scaled up as a precautionary measure to prevent any incidents from taking place. "A substantial police presence was arranged and barriers were installed to control the crowd," the telegram added. In a later document, commenting on a newspaper report, the British government indicated that at least two warnings of possible violence had come from the Libyan government. "The only warning - and it was not clearly expressed - was that by Fitouri and Zlitini to the FCO (Foreign Office) during the night of 16/17 April, repeated immediately before the shooting," it said, giving no other details.

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