

MEMORANDUM TO CABINET BY THE  
HON. THE PRIME MINISTERDEVELOPMENT OF LUQA AIRPORT

In 1967 the Joint Mission for Malta reported that "Luqa Airport, is capable technically of coping with all aircraft movements well into the late 1970's". The Mission pointed out, however, that the introduction of larger aircraft - including the so-called airbus - would probably necessitate an extended runway. The Mission also recommended that the air terminal building be expanded to at least double its present size. The "Time-Table for the New Malta" scheduled the planning of the runway extension by June, 1969 and the actual construction of the air terminal building and of the runway by the second quarter of 1969 and of 1971 respectively.

2. Acting on the Mission's recommendations, Cabinet decided on the 19th August, 1967 "that the future extension of the existing runway and the expansion of the airport buildings be studied and reported upon by special consultants from abroad, preferably from the continent." Following this decision, the Italian Government was asked to provide consultants at its own expense in terms of the Scientific and Technical Cooperation Agreement. Inter alia, the terms of reference included the extension of one of the runways to 13,000 ft. and an airport terminal to handle an estimated 1,200,000 passenger movements by 1980. The terms of reference are reproduced at Appendix A.

3. The Italian Government made available to us the services of Signor Marra, an airport engineer. Signor Marra was asked to give priority to the extension of the terminal building and then to proceed with detailed plans for the extension of one of the runways.

4. Signor Marra suggested that in his considered opinion a new air terminal complex should be built and sited elsewhere as the present terminal building was not amenable to further extension. This opinion was shared by the Director of Public Works and the Director of Civil Aviation. Signor Marra also produced plans aimed at making fuller use of the existing airport facilities to cope with an increased volume of traffic until such time as the new air

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terminal complex was built. These plans were not accepted by the Director of Civil Aviation who suggested that the present terminal could be made to cope with the anticipated increase in traffic over the next two or three years, simply by increasing the Customs and Police personnel.

5. In the meantime Lord Robens has been expressing concern that Signor Marra had not yet submitted plans for the extension of the runway and air terminal buildings and urged the Government to seek "competent advice elsewhere". On the 18th October, 1968 Lord Robens stated that "any further delay in considering the extension of the airport might prejudice the achievements of the targets set out in the action time-table".

6. Signor Marra submitted his 'progetto di massima' on the 4th December, 1968 in which he suggested that a new air terminal complex should be sited at the intersection of the two runways on the Mqabba side of the airport and that the shorter runway be extended to 13,000 feet in the direction of Safi.

7. The 'progetto di massima' was shown to the Services. Their immediate reaction was that the Marra plan would entail extensive reprovisioning of service installations estimated at some £8m., which would have to be met by the Government of Malta. This is in accordance with Section 6 (2) of Part 4 of the Annex of the Defence Agreement which provides that alternative accommodation and facilities agreed and acceptable to the British Authorities will have to be made available by and at the cost of the Government of Malta.

8. Following the reactions of the Services to the Marra plan, Lord Robens did no longer insist that 'delays in the extension of the airport might prejudice the achievements of the targets set out in the action time-table'. Instead he has narrowed down the short-term requirements to the adaptation of the present terminal facilities to allow for a higher throughput of passengers and their baggage. This, according to Lord Robens, requires no further deep and detailed study as solutions are available. Probably, he is referring to the Marra proposals and to the D.C.A.'s views that what is required is an increase in the number of attendant personnel at Luqa

Airport. In so far as the long term problem is concerned, Lord Robens has expressed doubts as to the need for a 13,000 feet runway and suggested that there is ample time to engage 'expert consultants' to study future needs and to ensure that "whatever site and lay-out is adopted, all the costs involved, however they arise, are taken into consideration". His suggestion now is that consultants should be appointed to provide a backing for Signor Marra's work.

9. The problem of reprovisioning Service installations hinges on the length of the runway and on the site for the air terminal complex. If the civil aviation needs of the future can be satisfied by a runway of 9,000 ft then the longer runway can be extended without the need of dislocating any service installations. Likewise if it were possible to extend the present terminal there will be no problems vis-a-vis the R.A.F.

10. On the subject of runway extension both Signor Marra and the Director of Civil Aviation are agreed that whilst the existing longer runway at Luqa is adequate for most types of aircraft using Malta at present, nevertheless the longer runway cannot comfortably take the present generation of jets unless it is extended to at least 10,000 ft. The Director of Civil Aviation further considers that the economics of air transportation are such that, with the advent of the air-bus and the jumbo jets, the small aircraft will not be able to operate economically. The Director of Civil Aviation also contends that once all international airports have 13,000 ft runways, the larger planes, with their lower operational costs and greater seating capacity, will bypass Malta unless it were similarly equipped. An extension to 13,000 ft is only possible on the 14/32 runway in the direction of Safi which entails the dislocation of Services installations. It is to be pointed out, however, that the arguments in favour of a 13,000 ft runway have not been supported by any studies of projected European air traffic flows and types of aircraft which are likely to use Malta in the future.

11. The extension of the present air terminal building provides a number of technical problems. Signor Marra has advised that a new site should be found for a new

air terminal complex. There has been all round agreement that operationally the ideal location for the new complex should be at the Mgabba side of the intersection of the two runways. At the moment, the site in question, which is in an area reserved for use by the R.A.F., has some service installations and appears to interfere with the R.A.F.'s plans of preparing for the advent of the Nimrod Squadron scheduled to replace the present Shackelton Reconnaissance Squadron in 1970. The R.A.F. have stated that the Nimrod Squadron which would employ some 1,600 personnel (1,000 military and 600 civilians) could only come to Malta if they can go out to tender - to start civil engineering and other works - not later than June 1969. It appears that hard-standings, a simulator building and hangarage space will have to be provided for the Nimrods. The British High Commissioner has stated that if the R.A.F. do not actually start preparatory work by June next the Ministry of Defence - in compliance with Britain's commitments to NATO - will have no option but to look for an alternative base for the Nimrods and Cyprus was mentioned.

12. The problem of the Nimrod Squadron is an immediate one in view of the fact that the Services would require to go to tender not later than June 1969, for the execution of engineering works on the site which Signor Marra has earmarked for the construction of an air terminal complex. It is to be remembered that the Shackelton Squadron is definitely to be withdrawn and, if this is not substituted by the Nimrods, Malta would lose the element of Maltese jobs in the complement of 1,600 required. In addition, the infrastructure required for the Nimrods is estimated at £3.5m. some of which may benefit Maltese contractors. The infrastructural works would be an added asset to Malta when the Defence Agreement lapses in 1974.

13. Set against the above is the long term need for Civil Aviation. It appears to be a fact that operationally the site suitable for the Nimrods provides the best operational position for a future air terminal. Alternative sites exist for the civil air terminal but we have no assessment yet of the long term disadvantages of such sites. The R.A.F. have indicated that operationally the Nimrods can be based in Malta if it is decided to locate the

terminal on the side of the runway on which the present terminal is located.

14. The British Government recognise the need for the Malta Government to provide for the expected growth of Civil Air Traffic and, in order to try to arrive at mutually acceptable solutions, it has suggested that meetings should be held, attended by experts and consultants of both Governments (including Signor Marra), at the earliest convenient date. If this proposal were acceptable to the Government of Malta it would be the intention of the British Government to bring experts from London to take part in the technical discussions.

15. The position is that so long as the Services are allowed the facilities listed in the Defence Agreement the Marra Plan cannot be implemented without encroaching on service installations. The Defence Agreement gives the right to the Government of Malta to request the Service organisations to vacate such establishments if the Government of Malta has provided alternative accommodation agreed by the British Authorities to be acceptable to them on the terms that all costs of the provision are a charge of the Government of Malta. As matters stand now it is highly unlikely that alternative sites, acceptable to the British Authorities can be found. On the other hand, even if such sites were available the cost of reprovisioning will make the scheme prohibitively costly. There is also the point that the Nimrod Squadron will make a contribution in terms of an alleviation of the rundown. Once the Shackelton Squadron is definitely to be withdrawn, if this is not replaced by the Nimrods the rundown will be further accelerated in 15 months time. This may not be politically tolerable.

16. Without prejudice to the question of reviewing the present arrangements governing the U.K. use of defence facilities in Malta, Hon. Ministers may wish to consider the British Government's proposal to hold meetings between expert advisers of the two Governments to find a way which would satisfactorily reconcile the future needs of Civil Aviation and the R.A.F. Affirmatively, Hon. Ministers may also wish to authorise an approach to the Italian Government to allow Ing. Marra to help us with the technical discussions prior to the drawing up of the final plans relating to the Airport extension.

7th April, 1969.

Appendix A.

TERMS OF REFERENCE :

1. Terminal Extension

- (a) to inspect the present accommodation at the Civil Airport, Malta, discuss and investigate the future air terminal requirements of Malta based on Luqa Airport;
- (b) make recommendations and submit phased plans for extensions of the present air terminal facilities to cater for the arrival/departure of an ultimate total of 1,200,000 passengers a year to be reached in 1980;
- (c) to provide phased detailed estimates of costs involved.

2. Runway Extension

- (a) to make recommendations and submit phased plans for the extension of one of the two Luqa runways to 13,000 ft. (4,000 m.);
- (b) to draw up phased detailed estimates of costs involved.

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