

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1066

INFO AMEMBASSY LISBON

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USCINCEUR

C O N F I D E N T I A L MADRID 1040

LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS:PINT, SP

SUBJ: STATUS OF FRANCO'S HEALTH AND PROSPECTS

1. DESPITE PERSISTENT RUMORS OF RECENT SET-BACK IN FRANCO'S HEALTH, BEST INFORMATION BASED ON FRANCO'S RECENT PUBLIC PERFORMANCE AND PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

COMMENTS OF SOME FAMILY MEMBERS AND OF WELL PLACED GOS SOURCES IS THAT FRANCO IS CONTINUING TO FUNCTION THOUGH WITH NOCICEABLE DECLINE IN VIGOR. AMONG RECENT RUMORS ARE THAT FRANCO HAS BEEN SLOW IN RECOVERING FROM BOUT WITH FLU EARLY THIS YEAR, THAT THERE HAS BEEN TROUBLESOME RISE IN UREA CONTENT, AND, ACCORDING TO FRENCH AMBASSADOR, RENEWED REPORTS OF CANCER. DURING JANUARY AND SO FAR IN FEB, FRANCO HAS CONDUCTED REGULAR TUESDAY AUDIENCES FOR MILITARY OFFICERS AND WEDNESDAY AUDIENCES FOR CIVILIAN LEADERS. THERE WAS NOTICEABLE DECLINE IN NUMBER OF CALLERS NORMALLY RECEIVED IN AUDIENCE S DURING THIRD WEEK OF JANUARY, WHICH COINCIDED WITH PERIOD FRANCO BELIEVED TO HAVE HAD FLU, AND SINCE THAT TIME PUBLISHED NUMBER OF DELEGATIONS OR INDIVIDUALS RECEIVED BY FRANCO AT AUDIENCES HAS BEEN ABOUT ONE-THIRD

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LOWER THAN IN PREVIOUS MONTHS. AUDIENCES HAVE REGULARLY

BEEN FOLLOWED BY USUAL PRESS PHOTO COVIGE SHOWING FRANCO ALERT AND IN REASONABLY GOOD CONDITION FOR 82-YEAR-OLD. FRANCO ALSO PRESIDED OVER LENGTHY COUNCIL OF MINISTERS MEETING FEBRUARY 7 WHICH TOOK SEVERAL DIFFICULT DECISIONS, INCLUDING DESPATCH OF NAVAL UNITS TO CEUTA AND MELILLA AND STERN WARNING STATEMENT OF GOVT'S DETERMINATION TO MAINTAIN ORDER IN FACE OF CURRENT STRIKE WAVE.

2. WEEKEND PRESS CARRIED STATEMENT BY FRANCO'S SISTER, PILAR, TO EFFECT THAT HER BROTHER'S HEALTH WAS GOOD. SHE WAS QUOTED AS SPECULATING THAT PHLEBITIC CONDITION IN FRANCO'S THIGH MAY HAVE ORIGINATED DURING SALMON FISHING DURING FIRST PART OF 1974 WHEN HE RECEIVED SHARP BLOW ON RIGHT LEG FROM FISHING POLE. (SISTER'S COMMENTS TO PRESS CAME IN WAKE OF WAVE OF RUMORS THAT IN COMMENTS TO PRESS SOME TWO WEEKS BEFORE SHE HAD ADMITTED FRANCO'S HEALTH WAS FAILING, BUT THAT THESE COMMENTS HAD BEEN SUPPRESSED IN PUBLISHED VERSION.)

3. FRANCO'S NEPHEW, NICOLAS FRANCO, TOLD EMBOFF FEB 10 THAT FRANCO HAS NO IMMEDIATE CRITICAL HEALTH PROBLEM OTHER THAN SLOW, STEADY DECLINE OF VIGOR THAT WOULD BE EXPECTED OF MAN GOING ON 83 YEARS OLD. HE ADDED THAT GENERALISMO NOW MORE FREQUENTLY PASSES UP STRENUOUS ACTIVITIES SUCH AS HUNTING PARTIES. NICOLAS FRANCO ADDED COMMENT THAT SEVERAL COMMENTS THAT HIS UNCLE HAD MADE RECENTLY IN PUBLIC AND IN PRIVATE STATEMENTS, AS WELL AS SOME CUSTOMARY ASSURANCES THAT GENERALISIMO HAD NOTICEBLY OMITTED TO MAKE, GAVE HIM IMPRESSION THAT CAUDILLO MAY BE CONSIDERING 1975 AS THE YEAR FOR HIS RELINQUISHMENT OF POWER. NICOLAS FRANCO ADDED AS PERSONAL OPINION THAT FALL OF 1975 WOULD BE LOGICAL TIME FOR TURNOVER PARTIALLY OR ENTIRELY OF CHIEF OF STATE FUNCTIONS TO JUAN CARLOS, SINCE IT WOULD FIT IN IDEALLY WITH INAUGURATION OF NEWLY ELECTED CORTES AND BEGINNING OF NEW POLITICAL YEAR FOLLOWING SUMMER BREAK. NICOLAS FRANCO, IN THIS CONNECTION, NOTED THAT PRINCE JUAN CARLOS HAD COAOCED TO HIM AND TO THREE OTHER CLOSE ASSOCIATES THAT HE WAS CONFIDENTIAL

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CONCERNED OVER THE ABSENCE OF ANY STAFF PREPARATIONS BY THE GOVERNMENT FOR THE SUCCESSION AND HAD ASKED HIM AND HIS OTHER CONFIDANTS FOR THEIR SUGGESTIONS AS TO SEQUENCE OF STEPS THAT SHOULD BE PLANNED TO MAKE TURNOVER SMOOTH AND UNTRAUMATIC.

4. AIDE TO PRIME MINISTER AIRAS TOLD EMBOFF THAT HE KNEW OF NO CURRENT, SPECIFIC CRITICAL HEALTH PROBLEM

FACING FRANCO OTHER THAN STEADY ADVANCE AGAING PROCESS, ADDING THAT PRIME MINISTER HAD NOTED ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS THT CAUDILLO DEFINITELY HAS "GOOD DAYS AND BAD DAYS". HE COMMENTED THAT, AS IS FREQUENTLY CASE WITH 83 YEAR OLD MEN, ON CAUDILLOS' "BAD DAYS" HESEAY RISE RELATIVELY LATE OR CURTAILS SOME DAYS ACTIVITIES BECAUSE OF FATIGUE. HE SUSPECTED THAT REPORTS OF THESE "BAD DAYS" FROM TIME TO TIME FILTER OUT AND THAT EXAGGERATION OF THEIR SERIOUSNESS COULD EASILY HAVE LED TO RUMORS THIS TIME AS IN PAST OF SOME HEALTH CRISIS.

5. DR. CASTRO FARINAS, CARDIO-VASCULAR SPECIALIST AND ONE OF TEAM OF PHYSICIANS ATTENDING FRANCO SINCE SUMMER HEALTH CRISIS, TOLD AIR ATTACHE ON FEB 2 AND AGAIN ON FEB 7 THAT THRONBO-FLEBITIC CONDITION IN FRANCO'S LEG HAS NOT RECURRED AND THAT HE UNAWARE OF ANY OTHER SERIOUS ILLNESS AFFECTING FRANCO AT THIS TIME. IN MORE RECENT REPORT, HOWEVER, EYE WITNESS AT FRANCO'S REGULAR FEB 12 AUDIENCE WITH CIVILIAN LEADERS REPORTED THAT FRANCO LOOKED UNUSUALLY TIRED AND LISTLESS, CONDITION HE UNDERSTOOD HAS EXISTED SINCE LAST FRIDAY'S STRENUOUS CABINET MEETING. FRANCO SAW ONLY FIVE GROUPS AT FEB 12 AUDIENCE, ONLY ABOUT ONE-THIRD AVERAGE NUMBER OF TWO MONTHS AGO, BUT HE SHOWED NO UNUSUAL DETERIORATION IN PRESS PHOTO COVERAGE. ON FEB 13 FRANCO RECEIVED CREDENTIALS OF NEW AMBASSADORS AT REGULAR CEREMONIES AT ROYAL PALACE WITH NO DIFFICULTIES APPARENT.

6. THIS GENERAL IMPRESSION OF DECLINING VIGOR AND SHORTENED WORKING HOURS IS WIDELY SHARED AMONG INFORMED SOURCES IN UPPER LEVELS OF SPANISH GOVERNMENT, THOUGH INDICATIONS ARE THAT FRANCO CONTINUES TO KEEP FAIRLY CONFIDENTIAL

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REGULAR SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS WITH DIFFERENT MINISTERS AND OTHER KEY GOVERNMENT FIGURES AND TO MAKE DECISIONS ON MAJOR ISSUES,ALTHOUGH WITH WHAT APPEARS TO BE EVEN MORE DELIBERATE PACE THAN IN PAST.

7. EVEN SO, ALTHOUGH FRANCO MAINTAINING CONTROL WITH DIMINISHED VIGOR, GROWING PUBLIC IMPRESSION IS TTHAT HIS GRIP HAS SLIPPED SIGNIFICANTLY AND THAT HIS DEPARTURE BY EITHER DEATH OR RETIREMENT IS IMMINENT. THIS PUBLIC IMPRESSION, THOUGH PERHAPS NOT SOLIDLY BASED ON FACTS, IS IN ITSELF POLITICAL REALITY THAT CONTRIBUTES TO CURRENT POLITICAL EFFERVESCENCE IN SPAIN AND TO GROWTH OF FEELING THAT AUTHORITY OF FRANCO, AND BY IMPLICATION ARIAS GOVERNMENT IS SLIPPING AND THAT SOME CHANGE IS IMMINENT. GOVERNMENT OBVIOUSLY ANXIOUS TO COUNTERACT

ANY IMAGE OF DRIFT AND INDICISION, AND PRECISELY THIS
CONCERN IS REPORTED TO HAVE BEEN MAJOR MOTIVE IN
FEB 7 CABINET DECISIONS TO ISSUE FIRM WARNING ON
CHALLENGES TO PUBLIC ORDER AND TO ACT QUICKLY AND
FORCEFULLY IN DESPATCHING NAVAL NAVAL UNITS FOR SHOW OF
FORCE AT CEUTA AND MELILLA.
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