

# The British Interests Section in Kampala, 1976-7

G. R. Berridge (January 2012)

At the end of June 1976 pro-Palestinian terrorists hijacked an Air France jet carrying many Jewish passengers and diverted it to Entebbe Airport in Uganda. Believing that the brutal, unpredictable and altogether ridiculous Ugandan dictator Idi Amin was complicit with the hijackers, on 4 July 1976 Israel conducted a successful raid on the airport in order to rescue the Jewish hostages (non-Jewish passengers had previously been released). Furious at his humiliation and vowing revenge, Amin at first directed his ire against Israel and those states which he claimed had colluded with it, notably Kenya. Britain was for once not in his firing line and sought to keep a low profile in the international furore which followed the raid. It had good reasons for this: it was still keen to get compensation for assets seized by Amin from the thousands of Asians holding British passports expelled by him in 1972 and for the British companies and tea plantations expropriated by his government in the same period;<sup>1</sup> it was also conscious of the vulnerability of the substantial body of UK citizens still resident in Uganda. Unfortunately for Anglo-Ugandan relations, however, a Jewish passenger with dual British-Israeli citizenship, 74 years old Mrs Dora Bloch, had been taken to a hospital prior to the raid and was left behind by the rescuers. Subsequently she was dragged from her hospital bed and murdered by Ugandan army officers. Meanwhile, the British high commissioner in Kampala James Hennessy had been repeatedly lied to when he tried to discover her whereabouts. Irritated by British demands for an explanation and the renewed hostility to him of the British press, in mid-July Amin expelled two members of the British high commission, harassed a third and broadcast

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**A note on sources:** Except where otherwise stated, all communications cited between the BIS in Kampala and the FCO are to be found in The National Archives (TNA), London, FCO31/2063. 'CAB Office' indicates that the document cited is to be found among the British Cabinet Office releases 'concerning Idi Amin – President of Uganda' located at [http://interim.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/foi/reading\\_room/topic/foreign\\_affairs.aspx](http://interim.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/foi/reading_room/topic/foreign_affairs.aspx). These papers appear in 48 rather randomly assorted groups, so the meaning of 'CAB Office Idi Amin – 34', for example, will be self evident.

<sup>1</sup> On this period, see Brind, *Lying Abroad*, ch. 4.

serious threats against the rest of the British community.<sup>2</sup> For the British government, already appalled at the treatment of Mrs Bloch, this was the last straw. The chances of negotiating compensation for the lost assets against the background of a mismanaged Ugandan economy seemed remote, the British community in the country was dwindling by the day, and now it seemed that the high commission was not being allowed to function as it should.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, on 28 July diplomatic relations with Uganda were severed.

The decision to break relations with Uganda was not one that was taken lightly. Britain had not initiated a break in diplomatic relations with any state since 1946 (with Albania) and had never initiated a break with a Commonwealth country. Even the Americans had not broken relations with Uganda when they had earlier withdrawn their own mission from Uganda. Preserving diplomatic relations in all conditions short of war was a traditional British reflex: Britain was a trading nation and could not afford to be choosy about those with whom it dealt; the existence of diplomatic relations did not signify approval of a regime; breaking relations was easy but restoring them was not; besides, when things were bad was just the time when diplomatic relations were needed most. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) had been preaching versions of this doctrine to new Commonwealth states in Africa and elsewhere for some years. It had, therefore, been a tense occasion when the British foreign secretary Tony Crosland called a large meeting in his room on 13 July to make the decision and – to the undisguised chagrin of Sir Michael Palliser, the permanent under-secretary – indicated that he wished to give equal weight to the views of all of those present, junior and senior alike.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, the senior FCO officials, led by Palliser, were firmly against a break. In discussion with the prime minister just the evening before, so too was Crosland, arguing that a break should only be contemplated when Britain's disengagement from Uganda was much more complete.<sup>5</sup> However, the junior officials together with the minister of state holding the Africa brief, Ted Rowlands, were equally firm in favour of severing relations and the foreign secretary allowed himself to be persuaded by them, with the proviso that – 'under cover of a restrained attitude' – the break should not be

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<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, 13 and 14 July 1976.

<sup>3</sup> FCO circular tel. to certain missions and dependent territories, 27 July 1976, CAB Office Idi Amin – 04 and 05.

<sup>4</sup> Palliser was 'livid' about this, Crosland, *Tony Crosland*, p. 351; see also *The Times*, 14 July 1976.

<sup>5</sup> Wright (10 Downing St.) to Fergusson (FCO), 12 July 1976, CAB Office Idi Amin – 07.

announced for a fortnight.<sup>6</sup> This was designed to avoid provoking Amin, allow more time to encourage the remaining Britons to get out of Uganda should they wish to do so, make arrangements for the protection of those British interests still left in Uganda – and finalise contingency plans with the Ministry of Defence for the evacuation of British subjects should Amin nevertheless react with his customary savagery.<sup>7</sup> In the event, his response to the break was muted and, subject to Amin's approval, France agreed to be the protecting power for Britain.<sup>8</sup> Securing the protection of the French was a good move for the British because the French ambassador in Kampala Pierre-Henri Renard, although in his first post as head of mission and only recently arrived in Uganda, was an experienced and skilful diplomat.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, just a few days earlier, on 21 July, he had successfully secured Amin's agreement to the unconditional release of the hijacked Air France airbus. This had been accompanied by a statement from the Ugandan dictator that he had done this 'because of the good understanding that existed between France and Uganda'.<sup>10</sup> It was further agreed between Paris and London that, in order to assist it in this work, a British-staffed British interests section (BIS) should at once be established in the French embassy in Kampala. This was just as well because by the time of the break there were still at a minimum between 200 and 300 British nationals left in Uganda, missionaries and teachers prominent in their number.<sup>11</sup> And only a few days afterwards Amin had, as feared, detained two of them and made more ominous threats against the rest.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> TNA, Cabinet Conclusions, 15 July 1976, CAB/128/59/15; *The Times*, 14 and 15 July 1976.

<sup>7</sup> Crosland, *Tony Crosland*, pp. 351-2; HC Deb 28 July 1976 vol. 916 cc 621-5; TNA, Cabinet Conclusions, 15 July 1976, CAB/128/59/15.

<sup>8</sup> French agreement to this had been secured very swiftly after the decision to break and therefore well ahead of the break itself, FCO to Paris, 15 July 1976, CAB Office Idi Amin – 06.

<sup>9</sup> Renard, who was 52 years old and a graduate of two of Paris's most famous schools, the Sciences Po and ENA, had long experience in North Africa and had also served in Beirut and Karachi, as well as for three years on France's permanent delegation to NATO. He had arrived in Uganda in November 1975, *Annuaire Diplomatique*, pp. 1144-5.

<sup>10</sup> *The Times*, 22 July 1976. Renard had also been involved, together with Amin, in the negotiations for release of the hostages prior to the Israeli raid on Entebbe airport, *The Times*, 2 July 1976. In addition, the other candidates for the role of protecting power for Britain in Kampala were not regarded by the FCO as 'suitable' in the then current circumstances: for the Commonwealth, Ghana and India; and for the European Community, West Germany (already representing US interests in Uganda) and Italy, Dales (FCO) to Wright, 26 July 1976, CAB Office Idi Amin – 05.

<sup>11</sup> This was the usual estimate at the time but a year later the foreign and commonwealth secretary told the prime minister that there were 600 British subjects in Uganda, together with a further 180 Canadian, other Commonwealth and Irish citizens, Owen to Callaghan, 22 May 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 34-5. It is worth recalling that in mid-1972 the British community had been over 7000-strong, Brind, *Lying Abroad*, p. 101.

<sup>12</sup> *The Times*, 2 Aug. 1976.

## Opening the Section

The BIS was given a diplomatic staff of two. Although small, this was fairly typical for an interests section.<sup>13</sup> Less typical was the fact that this did not by any means represent a radical drop in the size of Britain's representation. This was because in November 1974, against the background of an earlier dip in relations with Britain, Amin had ordered that the high commission should be reduced from its previous usual level of over twenty diplomatic staff to only five.<sup>14</sup> The section's two members were a first secretary (consular), Ian Glasby, and a third secretary (administration), Rob Wyper. Glasby, previously at the Washington embassy, had been offered the post of deputy high commissioner and head of chancery in Kampala shortly before the Entebbe raid but was sent out a few days after it in order to oversee the break in relations and head the interests section.<sup>15</sup> He might have been fresh to Uganda but he had plenty of experience of the kinds of consular problems with which he would have to deal in his new post, having worked in the Home Office Immigration Service for many years before transferring to the Diplomatic Service in 1968. He was also a good linguist and spoke French. Wyper had been in Kampala since March 1973, so he was able to bring continuity and local knowledge to the BIS until he left in late December (he was replaced a month later by Vic Welborn); Wyper was also a man temperamentally suited to the difficult conditions.<sup>16</sup>

An important question which at once came up, however, was: how was the BIS to be staffed with British diplomats without being cold-shouldered – and even expelled – by Amin's government? Under the terms of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (VCDR), which was signed in 1961 and entered into force in 1964, the French needed the agreement of Uganda to act as the protecting power for

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<sup>13</sup> Berridge, *Talking to the Enemy*, p. 41. However, when they first became popular, in the mid-1960s, and in circumstances when diplomatic relations were severed chiefly for symbolic reasons, there were some much larger interests sections, Young, *Twentieth-Century Diplomacy*, pp. 218-21.

<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, since October 1972 the high commissioner had been only acting rather than substantive. At this juncture the holder of this office, Richard Slater, accused by Amin of spreading malicious propaganda, had been asked to leave 'with the last Asian', Brind, *Lying Abroad*, p. 97. Britain had swiftly replied in kind to Amin's later move against the high commission, requiring the reduction to five of the Ugandan high commission in London, *The Times*, 6 and 7 Nov. 1974.

<sup>15</sup> Herma Glasby, 'Alfred Ian Glasby 1931-2009', [http://www.old-danensians.org.uk/documents/OldDanensiansClub\\_Newsletter\\_201001\\_January2010\\_Web.pdf](http://www.old-danensians.org.uk/documents/OldDanensiansClub_Newsletter_201001_January2010_Web.pdf) [accessed 17 Nov. 2011].

<sup>16</sup> Glasby to Wigan of East Africa Dept. (EAD) and Wigan to Glasby, 18 Aug. 1976.

Britain but did not need its consent to the appointment of the individual diplomats who were to serve in the 'British interests section' of their Kampala embassy, whether British or French. The FCO therefore took the view that a *British-staffed* BIS would be created, irrespective of Amin's wishes, as soon as his government had approved France's role and the French ambassador had notified it of the appointment of Glasby and Wyper to his embassy.<sup>17</sup> However, this was either to forget or deliberately ignore the fact that, since the signature of the VCDR and the sudden popularity in the mid-1960s of interests sections staffed by diplomats of the protected state, the custom had evolved that agrément was required for the appointment of each of them.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, supported by the French foreign ministry, Renard, who was destined to survive in Kampala until 1979, believed it to be prudent also to seek Amin's formal agreement to the appointment of the British diplomats, while hoping to secure this by intimating that this merely followed what by then had become normal practice, as indeed it had. It would also be the easier to get Amin's agreement to this, the French thought, if it was stressed that the BIS thus constituted would be restricted to consular functions.<sup>19</sup> Should the great leader be too busy or too careless to get round to replying and his foreign ministry be paralysed by the absence of guidance, in due course his silence might be taken to mean acquiescence, both to France's role as protecting power and the employment of British diplomats to assist it; the French would not wait 'indefinitely'.<sup>20</sup> (This position was consistent with FCO legal advice, which was that although the VCDR states in article 45 that a protecting power must be 'acceptable' to the receiving state this did not mean that its agreement had to be *express*.)<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, Glasby and Wyper would be able to rely on their status as *British* diplomats to guarantee them at least temporary diplomatic immunity;<sup>22</sup> they would also be able to enjoy the benefit of office space in the French Embassy and living accommodation in the French Residence for reasons of personal security.<sup>23</sup> These were real consolations for the British because for almost three weeks after the break the Ugandan foreign ministry was unable to give sensible answers to Renard's

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<sup>17</sup> FCO to Paris, 29 July 1976; and Batstone (Legal Advisers) to Ewans (EAD), 30 July 1976.

<sup>18</sup> Berridge, *Talking to the Enemy*, pp. 39-41.

<sup>19</sup> Glasby to FCO, 1 Aug. 1976.

<sup>20</sup> Paris to FCO, 30 July 1976.

<sup>21</sup> Batstone (Legal Advisers) to Ewans, 30 July 1976.

<sup>22</sup> Under Article 39(2) of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961) (VCDR), Ewans (EAD) to Martin (Protocol and Conference), 29 July 1976.

<sup>23</sup> Glasby to Wigan, 5 Sept. 1976; and Glasby to FCO, 28 Dec. 1976.

requests for the new role and composition of his embassy to be formally acknowledged.

Having been welcomed into their premises by the French the British diplomats at once set to work as a British interests section and on 1 August Renard shrewdly took them with him to what seems to have been his first meeting with Amin after the break in relations. Although the president looked somewhat askance at their presence and alleged that Britain had tried several times to kill him, he admitted that they could deal with official British property. This was interpreted in the FCO as de facto recognition of their status in the French embassy.<sup>24</sup> Renard, however, wanted more, so on 3 August he handed the chief of protocol a list of the British private and official vehicles and official premises for which he had assumed responsibility, together with a revised draft entry for the local diplomatic list showing the BIS as part of his embassy. He also told him that he proposed to fix French embassy plates to all of Britain's official properties.<sup>25</sup> Since the Ugandan expressed no objections to any of this, it was further evidence of the de facto recognition of the BIS.

The evidence that Renard was playing his cards well then came quite rapidly, so much so that Desmond Wigan, Glasby's main point of contact in East Africa Department of the FCO, wanted to see him awarded a British decoration.<sup>26</sup> On 10 August Amin told two BBC reporters that, for his own part, he was ready to resume relations with Britain at any time and without preconditions.<sup>27</sup> A week later his government finally intimated that it accepted France as the protecting power for Britain and creation of a British-staffed BIS;<sup>28</sup> and on 23 August the foreign ministry formally confirmed its agreement.<sup>29</sup> On the following day Renard circulated the decision to the whole Kampala diplomatic corps.<sup>30</sup> It must also have been at this time that the Ugandans agreed that the BIS could be housed in the former high commission building. The FCO thought this 'excellent news' and told Glasby that it assumed he

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<sup>24</sup> There is a handwritten but undated note on Batstone's advice of 30 July saying that this opinion had been 'overtaken' by Amin's reception of Glasby and Wyper with Renard; on this meeting with Amin, see *The Times*, 2 Aug. 1976.

<sup>25</sup> Glasby to FCO, 4 Aug. 1976.

<sup>26</sup> Although not just yet, because it would be the kiss of death, Wigan to Glasby, 18 Aug. 1976.

<sup>27</sup> Glasby to FCO, 11 Aug. 1976, CAB Office Idi Amin – 04; *The Times*, 11 Aug. 1976.

<sup>28</sup> tel. 410 from Glasby mentioned as just arrived in Wigan to Glasby 18 Aug. 1976 but not in file.

<sup>29</sup> Glasby to FCO, 23 Aug. 1976. It was, however, the middle of October before the Ugandan foreign ministry formally agreed that the French Embassy (in effect the BIS) could serve as the protecting power for Ireland, Australia and Canada, Glasby to Hunt (EAD), 18 Oct. 1976.

<sup>30</sup> French Embassy to all Diplomatic Missions, Consular Representatives and International Organisations accredited to Uganda, 24 Aug. 1976.

would be moving back in ‘as soon as feasible’ and recalling at least some of the locally-engaged staff sent on leave; he was also authorised to recruit a confidential secretary and told that it might soon be time, too, with things appearing to be settling down, to think about wives joining them. (Glasby thought this would be a good idea from the official standpoint because it would give the BIS an appearance of ‘normality’ in Ugandan eyes.<sup>31</sup>) Since the FCO further assumed that Glasby would now have greater freedom of movement, it added that the first priority for the BIS would be ‘to check on the numbers, welfare and whereabouts of the remaining British community’.<sup>32</sup>

The Ugandans, however, had added conditions to their agreement that the two British diplomats could move back to the three-storey former high commission building: first, that they could only occupy the ground floor; and second, that the two Ugandan diplomats who had remained in London to look after their country’s interests under the Saudi embassy should be permitted to occupy the premises of the Uganda Coffee Marketing Board as well as the whole of Uganda House in Trafalgar Square.<sup>33</sup> Amin himself had also suggested that Rob Wyper might be replaced, in Glasby’s view because the president wished to weaken the impression that he was allowing the high commission to continue functioning under another name.<sup>34</sup>

None of these points presented major obstacles to the British. Wyper was soon due for a move anyway (although it was not expected to be easy to find a suitable replacement), while the generous office space in London requested for the Ugandan Interests Section (UIS) provided a good basis on which to negotiate for more space for the BIS in the Kampala premises, the ground floor alone being regarded as insufficient by Glasby because it had no suitable office accommodation.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, the FCO, keeping in step with the Ugandans on the basis of reciprocity, on 19 August had indicated to the Saudi ambassador in London that it agreed to Saudi Arabia acting as the protecting power for Uganda and confirmed this with a formal note five days later, that is, immediately it heard that Uganda had formalized the status of the BIS – while reserving its position both on the space to be permitted the

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<sup>31</sup> Glasby to FCO, 25 Aug. 1976.

<sup>32</sup> Glasby to FCO, 23 Aug. 1976.

<sup>33</sup> Glasby to FCO, 23 Aug. 1976.

<sup>34</sup> Glasby to Wigan, 18 Aug. 1976.

<sup>35</sup> Glasby to FCO, 23 Aug. 1976.

Ugandans in London and the personnel who would be allowed to staff their interests section.<sup>36</sup>

As had been anticipated, on learning of the FCO's response to the Saudis the Ugandan foreign ministry had immediately relented on the question of the former high commission building, telling Renard that the BIS could also occupy the first floor and that none of the rest of the building need be formally sealed. This meant that it would have short-term access to all stored (pre-break) files and its own security accommodation (strong room and registry) on the second floor. Among other things, the foreign ministry also accepted that Wyper would not need to be replaced until late November or early December.<sup>37</sup> (In the event, it was nearly Christmas before he left.<sup>38</sup>)

By the beginning of September the BIS had moved back into the former high commission building, with Glasby occupying the old consular suite on the first floor and Wyper back in his old offices just round the corner. Seven locally engaged support staff had also returned.<sup>39</sup> Glasby moved his domicile into the British residence and Wyper returned to his home. (The residence was above Glasby's pay grade but both he and Renard believed it essential that it should be occupied in order to prevent its seizure by Amin or depredation by robbers.)<sup>40</sup> The two British diplomats had both received ID cards accrediting them to the French embassy and French CD plates had been fixed to all of their cars. The 'rather obvious surveillance' to which they had been subjected after their move to the French embassy also appeared to have ceased.<sup>41</sup> As members of the French embassy, Glasby and Wyper appear to have been able to conduct business directly with Ugandan officials, even in ministries other than the MFA – at least until the MFA once more tried to stop *all* missions doing this in December.<sup>42</sup> But the appearance of normality was deceptive: the BIS in the former British high commission building was manifestly not an embassy by another name.

For one thing, the main entrance to the former high commission remained locked and shuttered, access being through the courtyard. For another, the security of

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<sup>36</sup> FCO to Glasby, 23 and 24 Aug. 1976.

<sup>37</sup> Glasby to FCO, 25 Aug. 1976.

<sup>38</sup> Glasby to FCO, 23 Dec. 1976.

<sup>39</sup> BIS, French Embassy Kampala: List of Locally Engaged Staff, 8 Sept. 1976.

<sup>40</sup> Glasby to Wigan, 5 Sept. and to FCO, 28 Dec. 1976.

<sup>41</sup> Glasby to Wigan, 5 Sept. 1976.

<sup>42</sup> Glasby to Hunt, 16 Dec. 1976.



the building remained poor and Security Department in the FCO thought it would be impossible to get any construction work done to improve it and probably cause embarrassment with Amin to be seen trying.<sup>43</sup> Partly for this reason and partly because there was no routine access to the building's own strong room, all confidential work, notably the drafting of telegrams, still had to be done in the French embassy and any paper of security interest used by the BIS on its own premises had to be shredded immediately after reading.<sup>44</sup> Also, it proved impossible to find a suitable confidential secretary, so Glasby and Wyper had to continue doing all of their own typing.<sup>45</sup> The British Council Library remained closed because Renard, with whom Glasby agreed, thought that its 'possible association with propaganda etc' might provide Amin with an excuse if he ever wanted to get rid of BIS staff.<sup>46</sup> Above all, all BIS/FCO telegraphic traffic was read by the French, which was regarded by the FCO as perfectly fine for ninety-nine per cent of it: the French were giving wholehearted support and it was important to keep them in the picture. But the other one per cent had to wait on letters via the confidential bag, which was only monthly, or the infrequent visits of Glasby and Wyper to Nairobi.<sup>47</sup> To make matters worse, over a depressing weekend in mid-September Glasby discovered that the papers of the consular section were in a mess and that there was a serious backlog of work: 'the Consular Section was obviously in some disarray for a long time before the break,' he concluded, 'probably because of inadequate assistance for the Second Secretary and because he himself had his fingers in too many pies (eg some pretty ineffective "Information" and commercial work).'<sup>48</sup> In such difficult and unusual circumstances, what were the interests section's priorities?

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<sup>43</sup> Jones (Security Dept.) to Glasby, 1 Oct. 1976.

<sup>44</sup> Glasby to Wigan, 5 Sept. 1976.

<sup>45</sup> Glasby to Wigan, 5 Sept. and to Hunt, 4 Oct. 1976. In the second of these letters Glasby said that in his view only a 'white expatriate' would do, adding that 'British wives are most reluctant to accept a job within the BIS, for fear that their association with it might prejudice their own or their husband's position in Uganda. Some senior businessmen do not visit the BIS or French Embassy offices for the same reason,' he added, 'and indeed have told us so quite frankly.'

<sup>46</sup> Glasby to Gibbs (Inspectorate, FCO), 29 Sept. 1976.

<sup>47</sup> Wigan to Glasby, 18 Aug. 1976. There was a telex machine on the second floor of the former British high commission building which both Glasby and the FCO were tempted to exploit for unclassified communications. However, as Glasby anticipated, this was vetoed by Renard on the grounds that it would have to use commercial lines and 'would almost certainly be seen by the Ugandans as indicating that the former BHC was continuing to operate under another name'. Glasby also suspected that Renard, who liked to have tight control of his embassy, disliked the idea of the BIS having independent communications, Glasby to Wigan 14 Sept. and to Hunt, 24 Sept.; Mundy (Comms. Ops., FCO) to Wyper 16 Sept. 1976; and Ewans to Hunt, 16 Nov. 1976.

<sup>48</sup> Glasby to Wigan, 13 Sept. 1976.

### **Consular work: the ‘absolute priority’**

It had been assumed from the beginning that the section’s top priority would be consular work. This followed from Amin’s renewed threats to British subjects in Uganda following the Bloch affair,<sup>49</sup> the extent of unpaid pensions and gratuities to those who had already left, and Renard’s anxiety that the BIS (and his own embassy) would be imperilled if it did not keep the lowest profile possible and therefore do nothing *but* consular work.

Certainly, no rivalry to the consular priority could possibly have come from the question of pursuing compensation for the assets of Asians and other Britons seized by Amin in 1972 and 1973. The former high commission’s preliminary negotiations on this subject had already been going nowhere, the foreign exchange from which compensation would have had to be paid was rapidly draining away, and in his first public reaction to the break Amin had stated that the subject was now a ‘closed chapter’.<sup>50</sup> But export promotion was a different matter. This was by then a well-established priority for all of Britain’s overseas missions and it was against this background that Glasby had continued to suffer from a deluge of advertising literature from British firms and publishing houses. In the circumstances, the BIS simply could not cope with this but, in begging the FCO to do what it could to stem the flow, he felt obliged to add that ‘we shall, of course, keep an eye open for export opportunities and report as appropriate’ even though ‘these are likely to be few and to be originated by the Ugandan State Corporations themselves, dealing direct with UK suppliers.’<sup>51</sup> He also took it as a matter of course that he was still expected to undertake ‘any quasi-political reporting which the post is capable of doing’.<sup>52</sup> These remarks prompted a discussion of the question of priorities which was followed up by meetings between Hunt of EAD and Glasby and Renard in Nairobi in November. As a result, it was decided that with the reduction of the existing backlog of consular work there might

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<sup>49</sup> *The Times*, 16 July 1976.

<sup>50</sup> *The Times*, 29 and 30 July 1976; see also Memo. of Hunt, ‘Functions of the BIS in Kampala’, 25 Nov. 1976.

<sup>51</sup> Glasby to Wigan, 3 Sept. 1976.

<sup>52</sup> Glasby to Hunt, 26 Oct. 1976.

be scope for greater commercial activity (but not initiative work), and that political reporting should come last on the list.<sup>53</sup>

The BIS's 'absolute priority',<sup>54</sup> consular work, included issuing entry certificates to the UK to Ugandan citizens, despite the fact that the high commission itself had felt it needed to abandon this task following its enforced slimming down in 1974. Resumption of entry clearance was prompted by fears of retaliation against the BIS by Amin for the alleged harassment by British immigration officials of Ugandans (including Ugandan diplomats) arriving in London at Heathrow Airport.<sup>55</sup> The great bulk of the consular work, however, was looking after the persons and property of the British community in Uganda who had failed to heed the warning to leave the country before the break and trying to clear up the problems left behind by those who had departed. This meant assisting individuals detained by Amin's security forces, dealing with income tax problems and the foreign exchange side of the proceeds from the sale of British properties, locating the birth certificates of Asians driven from the country, trying to give assistance to departed civil servants whose pensions or gratuities from the Ugandan government had ceased to arrive, and so on.<sup>56</sup>

No more public threats to UK citizens in Uganda were made in the last months of 1976 but the general reign of terror continued and it was well known that Amin had come to regard them all as spies or propagandists – or both. When the murder of the Anglican Archbishop of Uganda (plus two of Amin's own cabinet ministers) early in the following year produced the inevitable outcry in Britain and stiffened the determination of the new British foreign secretary, David Owen, to press for the UN Commission on Human Rights to conduct an independent investigation of human rights violations in Uganda, the explicit threats were renewed.<sup>57</sup> As a result, consular protection remained urgent throughout the short life of the BIS. It was also the more difficult because the British community was dispersed and its members had not been obliged to register with the high commission or report their movements.<sup>58</sup> Keeping in

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<sup>53</sup> Memo. of Hunt, 'Functions of the BIS in Kampala', 25 Nov. 1976; see also Hunt to Glasby, 5 Nov. 1976, Ewans to Hunt (in Nairobi), 16 Nov. 1976, and Hunt to Collins (Dept. of Trade), 29 Nov. 1976.

<sup>54</sup> Memo. of Hunt, 'Functions of the BIS in Kampala', 25 Nov. 1976

<sup>55</sup> *The Times*, 7 Oct. 1976; Glasby to Hunt, 26 Oct. 1976.

<sup>56</sup> Glasby to Wigan, 13 Sept. 1976; Glasby to Hunt, 26 Oct. 1976; Memo. of Hunt, 'Functions of the BIS in Kampala', 25 Nov. 1976.

<sup>57</sup> *The Times*, 3 Mar., 9, 11 and 21 May, 1977.

<sup>58</sup> The FCO told Glasby that documenting the numbers and whereabouts of 'UKCs' was important not just for ordinary consular reasons but because Amin might renew his demand for such details and it might be 'politic' to comply with it, FCO to Kampala, 23 Aug. 1976.

touch with them – especially the missionaries in isolated areas – was also seriously hindered by the condition of the roads, the shortage of petrol and the erratic telephone system.<sup>59</sup> And then there was the problem of Amin's security forces. In mid-August Glasby wrote to the EAD that 'The White Father and Claque deportations demonstrated to me that the BIS will have a difficult enough task performing normal consular functions, if only because Amin's instruments of law and order operate in a way which is totally alien to our own.'<sup>60</sup>

The ranking of the BIS's priorities formally established in November 1976 was a general rule which appears to have held good for the duration of the section's short life but there was a brief period in late May and early June of 1977 when political reporting was certainly more important than commercial activity and at least rivalled the urgency of consular work. This was because the section was badly needed to help answer the question as to whether or not Amin meant to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting due to start in London on 8 June. This was a prospect which the British government could not stomach and thought might well wreck the whole conference. As a result, after much deliberation and consultation with other Commonwealth members, it had decided that it would have to persuade him not to exercise his right to come and, failing that, deny him entry to the United Kingdom.<sup>61</sup> Pulling this off was never going to be easy because although Amin had not attended the last two Commonwealth conferences, his sense of his own importance had recently been magnified by his chairmanship of the Organization of African Unity and he had repeatedly announced his intention to be present at the June meeting. At the beginning of May he had added a second Boeing 707 to his national airline to carry him to London, accompanied by a party of about 250, up to 40 of whom it was later believed could be armed bodyguards.<sup>62</sup> There were also some Commonwealth states, notably Nigeria, which felt that banning him would establish a worrying precedent.

Having failed by a campaign of intra-Commonwealth diplomacy and heavy public hints to shift Amin from his declared intention to attend the meeting, the British prime minister James Callaghan resorted to the nuclear option: he wrote him a

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<sup>59</sup> Glasby to FCO, 1 Aug. 1976.

<sup>60</sup> Glasby to Wigan, 18 Aug. 1976.

<sup>61</sup> TNA, Cabinet Conclusions: 17 Feb. 1977, CAB/128/61/6; 24 Feb. 1977, CAB/128/61/7; 17 Mar. 1977, CAB/128/61/11; 26 May 1977, CAB/128/61/21 (Limited Circulation Annex). See also *The Times*, 1 June 1977.

<sup>62</sup> *The Times*, 2 May 1977; Operation 'Bottle', 23 May 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 33.

private and confidential letter, which was delivered (and orally reinforced) by a Saudi emissary on 25 May.<sup>63</sup> This made it clear that the president would be denied entry to the United Kingdom on the grounds that it would do further harm to Anglo-Ugandan relations; on the other hand, a Ugandan delegation led by a special representative would be free to attend and enjoy the customary courtesies.<sup>64</sup> But this produced no promise from Amin that he would not come, so the British were still kept guessing.<sup>65</sup> Although the French – like the Saudis – had come to believe that he probably would not come and was only keeping the possibility open in order to cause maximum discomfort to Britain, their embassy in Kampala was of the opinion that not even the members of Amin’s closest entourage knew his real intentions.<sup>66</sup> And discomfort there certainly was in London, not least because of the elaborate contingency plans (Operation ‘Bottle’) needed to try to divert him to a military airfield should it prove necessary to let him land in the United Kingdom and then deal with him on the ground. Numerous government departments and various branches of the police and military (including snipers) had to be involved in this. It was also part of this planning that the cross-Whitehall crisis response committee, usually known by the place where it was convened – the Cabinet Office Briefing Room (COBR) – would need to be activated should a landing by Amin be considered imminent.<sup>67</sup> And from 27 May until the end of the Commonwealth meeting the staff involved had to be put on a high state of alert.<sup>68</sup>

On 6 June Uganda Radio reported that Amin was leaving for the Commonwealth meeting by special plane on the following day.<sup>69</sup> On that day, just before the conference was due to start, there were credible reports that he was on his way to London and, to preserve their credentials with him, the French had told him

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<sup>63</sup> This was a member of the Saudi embassy in London. The FCO was keen that the French should understand that delivering this message was beyond the scope of their Kampala embassy’s responsibilities to Britain and would simply have increased its difficulties, while to have employed a Commonwealth channel might have proved controversial. A Saudi emissary was employed because of the role of the Saudis as protecting power for Uganda in Britain and because they were believed to have influence with Amin, FCO to Paris (personal for ambassador), 26 May 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 32. See also Wright to Wall (FCO) and Wall to Wright, 26 May 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 33; and Note of a Meeting between the Prime Minister and the Nigerian Federal Commissioner for External Affairs at 10 Downing St., 6 June 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 27.

<sup>64</sup> Callaghan to Amin, 22 May 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 33.

<sup>65</sup> Amin to Rumphal [*sic*], 31 May 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 29; *The Times*, 1 June 1977.

<sup>66</sup> Paris to FCO, 27 May 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 32.

<sup>67</sup> Operation ‘Bottle’, 23 May 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 33.

<sup>68</sup> Wilson (Home Office) to Dept. of Trade, 27 May 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 39, and min. of Wilson, 26 May 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 40; see also Morris (Home Office) to Wall, 27 May 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 40.

<sup>69</sup> FCO to Bonn, Brussels etc. 6 June 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 27.

that his aircraft would be permitted to land in France.<sup>70</sup> At lunchtime David Owen was told by the home secretary Merlyn Rees, who had in the morning absented himself from the Queen's Jubilee Service at St. Paul's Cathedral because of the crisis,<sup>71</sup> that the mischievous Ugandan president had actually landed in Dublin.<sup>72</sup> This soon proved to be a false alarm but on 8 June, as the Commonwealth meeting opened, official statements from Uganda still insisted that Amin was on his way.<sup>73</sup> It appears to have been not until the evening of 9 June that the British government could begin to be confident that he would really not turn up. At this juncture Uganda Radio – making no mention of the Commonwealth meeting – announced that Amin was back in Uganda from a visit to the south-west of the country.<sup>74</sup>

Against this background it is hardly surprising that in late May and early June the BIS had been required to do whatever it could to establish whether or not Amin intended to come to London. Indeed, at the request of the FCO Glasby was instructed by the Quai d'Orsay to provide 'daily sit reps' on the outlook for his arrival as on the general atmosphere in Uganda.<sup>75</sup> To enable himself to do this, Glasby did not just rely on Uganda Radio. Among other things, on 7 June, the day that Amin was supposed to be leaving for London, he sent the second secretary Welborn to Entebbe airport to see if he could confirm his departure. He could not get close enough to be sure but all the signs suggested that Amin was still in Uganda at lunchtime, albeit at the airport.<sup>76</sup> Glasby also tapped informants among the British community. Supporting Welborn's conclusion, one of these told the head of the BIS that Amin had been sighted by a ministry of health official in the presidential suite at Entebbe Airport on the following day, 8 June, thereby giving the BIS its 'first lead' on his whereabouts. The source was reportedly reliable and Glasby thought the story made sense.<sup>77</sup> Since it was during these days, just before and just after the start of the Commonwealth meeting, that British anxiety about Amin's intentions was particularly acute, Glasby did more than use the information he had gathered to provide 'daily' situation reports. Indeed,

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<sup>70</sup> Paris to FCO, 7 June 1977 and FCO to Cairo etc., 7 June 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 26.

<sup>71</sup> Benn, *Conflicts of Interest*, pp. 160-1. Reporting this, Benn added in his diary that 'this is a great story just now.'

<sup>72</sup> The Irish government had dispatched a small military force to Dublin airport, *The Times*, 8 June 1977; Owen, *Time to Declare*, p. 274.

<sup>73</sup> *The Times*, 9 June 1977.

<sup>74</sup> Glasby to FCO, 9 June 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 38; *The Times*, 10 June 1977.

<sup>75</sup> Paris to FCO, 23 and 24 May 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 33; and Paris to FCO, 27 May 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 32.

<sup>76</sup> Glasby to FCO, flash tels. 122 and 125 of 7 June 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 25.

<sup>77</sup> Glasby to FCO, flash tel. 129, 9 June 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 25.

between 6 and 9 June he dispatched at least a dozen telegrams to the FCO on the likelihood of Amin's appearance in London, most of which seem to have been sent 'flash', that is, with the highest possible priority.<sup>78</sup> He also made clear his view – prudently adding in a manner that would have been approved by Machiavelli that this was 'backed by informed opinion' in Kampala<sup>79</sup> – that Amin would not appear in London. This proved to be accurate.

### **Closing down**

The fate of the BIS in Kampala was sealed by the action taken by the British government to prevent Amin's attendance at the Commonwealth meeting in June 1977. It did not help, either, that in its final communiqué the meeting roundly condemned his regime for disregarding the sanctity of life and massive violations of basic human rights.<sup>80</sup>

There had never been any illusions that such developments would mean trouble for the British community – including the BIS – in Uganda.<sup>81</sup> Already at a cabinet meeting on 17 March 1977, Callaghan had said that contingency plans would have to be made against the possibility of retaliation.<sup>82</sup> And it was not long after this that the BIS was making its own contingency plans for its possible expulsion or withdrawal at short notice. In early May there remained some uncertainties in the section's planning, for example as to whether it would be possible to leave by air, but Glasby was confident of some things, among them that the French embassy would take care of all of his 'files of interest', cash, blank passports, seals, and so on – and the BIS's cars as well if he and Welborn were able to take flights to Nairobi.<sup>83</sup>

After receiving Callaghan's private letter in late May, Amin had begun to ratchet up the pressure. He followed up his dismissive and accusatory reply with a

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<sup>78</sup> Glasby to FCO, tels. 120-132 (selected) in CAB Office Idi Amin – 25, 27 and 38.

<sup>79</sup> Glasby to FCO, flash tel. 122, 7 June 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 25. This was the formula recommended by Machiavelli in his 'Advice to Raffaello Girolami', p. 43.

<sup>80</sup> *The Times*, 16 June 1977.

<sup>81</sup> When the obligation to admit Amin to the Commonwealth meeting had been queried at the cabinet on 17 February 1977, Tony Benn recorded in his diary: 'Of course in the back of our minds is the possibility that if we did keep him out ... he might kill every English man and woman in Uganda as a reprisal. He is a brute.' *Conflicts of Interest*, pp. 40-1.

<sup>82</sup> TNA, Cabinet Conclusions, 17 Mar. 1977, CAB/128/61/11.

<sup>83</sup> TNA, Glasby to Hunt, 9 and 10 May 1977, FCO31/2181.

warning reported by Uganda Radio that all Britons convicted of crimes in Uganda would be imprisoned for 20 years before being deported.<sup>84</sup> A few days later he was reported by Uganda Radio as making more attacks on Britain and issuing further vague threats to the British community.<sup>85</sup> On 8 June a ban was announced on all Britons leaving Uganda, together with the added observation that Britain would be wasting its time trying to rescue them because they were scattered all over the country.<sup>86</sup> And on the following day, to the accompaniment of a statement that a Briton just arrested for spying would be shot if found guilty,<sup>87</sup> Amin retaliated against the BIS itself, albeit indirectly. The quixotic and in part vague announcement was made that the French had allowed certain British nationals (was this the BIS or was it not?) to use their embassy in Kampala for subversive purposes and that, in the interests of preserving the excellent relations obtaining between France and Uganda, the BIS should be told to find another protecting power.<sup>88</sup> In the short interval that this development was pondered by the British and the French, Britons in Uganda were next ordered – under the threat of immediate imprisonment – not to gather in groups of more than three, nor to travel more than three to a car; they were also warned once more that they were being watched closely.<sup>89</sup> Security agents began visiting some of their homes in search of ‘spies’.<sup>90</sup>

On instructions, Renard had rejected the Ugandan charges and insisted on his right to continue protecting British interests, although the French soon changed their minds, coming to the unavoidable legal conclusion that with Uganda’s agreement to their role withdrawn, they would have to give it up.<sup>91</sup> Unwilling to play Amin’s game and faced with unattractive alternatives,<sup>92</sup> the foreign secretary David Owen soon decided that the only thing to do was to close the BIS and with it the Ugandan Interests Section in London.<sup>93</sup> The French were at once informed and, preparing to

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<sup>84</sup> *The Times*, 2 June 1977.

<sup>85</sup> *The Times*, 6 June 1977.

<sup>86</sup> *The Times*, 9 June 1977.

<sup>87</sup> This turned out to be Robert Scanlon, a British-born engineer who had two years earlier adopted Ugandan citizenship. He was later beaten to death in prison, *The Times*, 10 Oct. 1977.

<sup>88</sup> Glasby to FCO, 9 June 1977 (flash tels. 130 and 131) and Wall to Wright, 10 June 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 38; *The Times*, 10 June 1977.

<sup>89</sup> *The Times*, 11 June 1977.

<sup>90</sup> *The Times*, 13 June 1977.

<sup>91</sup> Paris to FCO 9 June, 1977 and Wall to Wright, 10 June 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 3.

<sup>92</sup> Wall to Wright, 10 June 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 3.

<sup>93</sup> In a personal message to Prince Saud, Owen emphasised that the decision to close the UIS in no way reflected ill on the Saudi Embassy: ‘on the contrary,’ he said, ‘your ambassador has throughout handled a delicate issue in an exemplary fashion’, FCO to Jeddah, 17 June 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 25.



take its stand on the argument that the Ugandans had no business attempting to apply the ban on the departure of UK citizens to those with diplomatic status, the FCO instructed Glasby to prepare ‘in strict secrecy’ for the British component of the BIS and their families ‘to leave Uganda rapidly’.<sup>94</sup> To avoid provoking the Ugandans the UIS in London, which survived only on the basis of reciprocity, would not be ordered closed until the British party were safely out of the country.<sup>95</sup>

Renard thought that Amin might change his mind about the BIS if he was made to understand that the corollary of its closure would be the closure of the UIS; this, the French ambassador believed, would strike at his *amour propre* as well as Uganda’s interests.<sup>96</sup> However, Owen’s patience was exhausted: ‘The French had been robust in defending our interests’, he told the cabinet at its meeting on 16 June, ‘and it was intolerable to be told to seek help from another country.’<sup>97</sup> Diplomatic law notwithstanding, there also seem to have been real fears for the safety of Glasby and Welborn. As a result, at the request of the FCO, the Quai instructed Renard to inform the Ugandans of Britain’s decision and the British diplomats were ordered to leave Uganda as soon as possible after the French ambassador had made his *démarche*. These steps were taken on 15 June, a day of more flash telegrams and feverish activity for the BIS. Glasby and Welborn, together with their families, had therefore already arrived safely in Nairobi on an Air France flight by the time that Owen informed the cabinet that he had decided to pull them out.<sup>98</sup>

That the speedy escape of the British diplomats could be pulled off was, however, by no means a foregone conclusion. To avoid arousing the suspicions of its Ugandan staff, the BIS had needed to continue working normally until the very moment that Renard delivered his *démarche*. For his part the French ambassador had made dummy bookings for the British party on a more innocuous flight, been careful to tell the Ugandan foreign ministry that no decision had yet been taken to expel the UIS,<sup>99</sup> and warned the Air France crew on the evening flight to Nairobi to look out for

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<sup>94</sup> FCO to Kampala, 13 June 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 02; FCO to Paris, 13 June 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 03.

<sup>95</sup> FCO to Paris, 13 June 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 03; and FCO to Paris and Kampala, 14 June 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 02.

<sup>96</sup> Renard to Paris, 14 June 1977; TNA, min. of Ewans, 14 June 1977, FCO31/2181.

<sup>97</sup> TNA, Cabinet Conclusions, 16 June 1977, CAB/128/61/22.

<sup>98</sup> TNA, Nairobi to FCO, 15 June 1977, FCO31/2181; see also *The Times*, 17 June 1977.

<sup>99</sup> TNA, Glasby to FCO (flash tel.), 15 June 1977, FCO31/2181. The Saudi embassy in London was informed on the day following the safe arrival of the British party in Nairobi that the UIS would have to be closed, TNA, min. of Rosling (EAD), 16 June 1977, FCO31/2181; FCO to Paris and Kampala 14 and to Jeddah 16 June 1977, CAB Office Idi Amin – 02.

the late arrival of five ‘special passengers’. Because of the delays involved in paying off the locally engaged staff and securing their premises and equipment (even so, forgetting to remove the French Tricolour from the masthead), Glasby and Welborn got to Entebbe airport even later than planned. But this was fortuitous because, the flight nominally having been closed, the Ugandan immigration officer had disappeared from his desk. And so it was that, leaving their completed embarkation cards with Renard and carrying hand luggage only, the British diplomats were able to make their uneventful departure.<sup>100</sup> Well deserved praise was afterwards heaped on the wily French ambassador for making this possible and he and Glasby remained life-long friends.<sup>101</sup>

## Conclusion

The short life of the British interests section in Kampala reveals some interesting points about the evolution of diplomatic practice in this area. It confirms, for example, that *express* consent by the receiving state is not necessary for the establishment of a protecting power because the French embassy was functioning in this role for over three weeks before this was given. It also shows that a protecting power, especially in peacetime, might be strikingly generous in the assistance it gives to a protected state, despite the risks which this runs of courting the animosity of the receiving state. As to the interests section itself, the formation of the BIS strengthened the emerging norm that *agrément* is needed for each protected state diplomat appointed to it, while also showing that the choice of staff for an interests section operating in a hostile environment needs particular care. In addition, the case illustrates the obvious practical advantages to a protected state of being able to house its interests section in the former diplomatic mission’s premises despite the probable drawbacks of this from a security point of view. The experience of the BIS at the time of the Commonwealth meeting in London in June 1977 also demonstrates that even an interests section nominally restricted to consular work will be likely to engage in political reporting as

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<sup>100</sup> TNA, draft blue min. of Glasby, ‘The Withdrawal of the British Interests Section, French Embassy, Kampala, 15 June 1977’, June 1977, FCO31/2181.

<sup>101</sup> Nairobi to FCO (flash tel.), 15 June 1977; draft tel. from Owen to French foreign minister, 17 June 1977; Herma Glasby, ‘Alfred Ian Glasby 1931-2009’, [http://www.old-danensians.org.uk/documents/OldDanensiansClub\\_Newsletter\\_201001\\_January2010\\_Web.pdf](http://www.old-danensians.org.uk/documents/OldDanensiansClub_Newsletter_201001_January2010_Web.pdf) [accessed 17 Nov. 2011].

well, not least because this is relatively easy to conceal. Finally, this history shows that experienced and conscientious ambassadors such as Renard will be uneasy at permitting a foreign-staffed interests section to have independent communications; after all, its members have joined their staff and, as a result, they are responsible for their actions – to their own foreign ministry as well as to the receiving state: Glasby and Wyper had become *French* diplomats and were therefore under the authority of the *French* ambassador. Whatever else an interests section may enjoy, including even a large staff as well as its own premises, if it has no independent communications it is not an embassy by another name, as is sometimes loosely said of such sections. (I now think that I gave insufficient weight to this point in my *Talking to the Enemy*.) If an interests section staffed by former diplomats of the protected state tries to cut out on its own it will be likely to forfeit the sympathy of the ambassador of the protecting power and may regret this, not least if its members have to leave in a hurry. The members of the BIS in Kampala were alert to Renard's proper sensitivities when they were tempted to use their own telex and played straight with him. As a result, their relationship was always harmonious and he took risks to help them get out.

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