

MEDIASCAN TRANSCRIPT

ABC 20/20

23 February 1984

Thursday

MODERATOR: Hugh Downs

REPORTER: Sylvia Chase

SUBJECT: BUNKER DIPLOMACY

DOWNNS: Right now there are more than 6,000 American diplomats in danger around the world. Tonight we want to tell you the dimensions of that danger and we want to tell you what the government is doing to protect those American diplomats. There was plenty of talk about terrorism in President Reagan's televised news conference last night, which focused on one of the most critical trouble spots in the world--Lebanon. This week U.S. Marines began pulling back from Lebanon to the safety of warships offshore. But 200 Marines will be left in Beirut to protect the embassy there, which has been evacuated of all but essential personnel. Tonight, with a report on the hazards our diplomats face everywhere from terrorists, and the new defenses against those hazards, here is Sylvia Chase. Sylvia.

CHASE: Hugh, I was in Beirut working on tonight's report just before that embassy evacuation and although the State Department has active security systems in place, we learned in our report that the United States is struggling to keep up with the terrorist challenge, especially the new threat posed by suicide truck bombs. We begin with a look at another high-risk embassy closer to home than Lebanon.

CHASE: This is our embassy in El Salvador. It is an embassy that is on the very highest alert. In fact, it looks more like a military base under seige than a diplomatic post. Marines, protected by sandbag bunkers on the roof, constantly scan the busy streets surround the embassy. They're responsible for defending everything inside the embassy compound, under orders to shoot if attacked. The building is constructed with bullet proof glass and the windows are piled high with sandbags on every floor. The wall, surrounding the building, is 15 feet of reinforced concrete and the Salvadoran guard that mans that post is on a 24-hour lookout. Mirrors are used to check every vehicle that enters the embassy grounds for bombs. And every visitor who has business inside must pass through a steel turnstile. STEVE ROBINSON (LIFE MAGAZINE): Once the visitor got past the gates, at the inside of the embassy, was checked out by Salvadoran personnel, which in almost every case involved are frisked, they would move into a waiting room where they would present their papers or whatever.

CHASE: As a Life Magazine reporter, Steve Robinson was one of the only journalists ever to be given a first-hand look at the security measures taken inside this, or for that matter any, embassy. Based on photographs and his own notes from that 1981 assignment, we asked him to illustrate what would happen if the embassy faced a full scale attack. He said employees would have two priorities--destruction of sensitive documents and evacuation. ROBINSON: As you can see there's one floor that's completely closed off with bars. That's a

MEDIASCAN - ABC2020022384

1

secured floor that would really be a refuge in the event that the embassy was really stormed. The Marines would instruct all the embassy personnel how to put on their gas masks, where to assemble, what to do in the event that they were told to gather up all sensitive documents and take them to the burn barrels. All the embassy personnel would be hoisted up into the helicopters and presumably whisked away to safety.

CHASE: Marines assigned to protect our embassies now get special training. This is a drill at a mock embassy at the Marine Guard Training School in Quantico, Va., and this kind of exercise, learning to hold back violent demonstrators, was intensified here after 1979, a year three embassies were overrun by mobs. But the worst was yet to come. DR. ROBERT KUPPERMAN (CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES): The terrorists of the 1970s, by and large, were not very bright. They were interested in holding, along with the media helping them, holding lives in the balance. Today we see very very crude operations. They're willing to kill a hell of a lot of people.

CHASE: And a lot of people have died. At our embassy in Beirut just last year those crude operations first occurred. What happened here in Beirut on April 18, 1983, marked a beginning of a new kind of terrorism against American embassies and American personnel--mobile bombs in cars or trucks driven by individuals willing to die. It was an attack unexpected, effective and deadly. Sixty-three people died. One of the survivors of the attack was John Reid. JOHN REID (FORMER BEIRUT EMBASSY STAFF): The first thing that I was aware of was a tremendous flash. Everything in the office seemed to turn light. I didn't realize that the whole center section of the embassy had been collapsed. It was just bedlam. It was chaos. I don't think anybody expected that somebody was going to drive a truck in there and kill himself trying to kill the rest of us.

CHASE: To see how this new method of attack had been carried out we traced the route taken by the suicide driver to discover just how he could have gotten past what was supposed to have been the highest level of security. Back then American Marines patrolled the embassy roof while below Lebanese troops guarded the driveway surrounded by sandbags and barbed wire. But in effect the entrance itself was left wide open. No barriers were in place and the terrorist was able to drive directly past the Lebanese guards and into the embassy's midsection. The Americans were not adequately prepared and the host government troops had simply not anticipated such an attack. GORDON HARVEY (STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICE OF SECURITY): Right after the Beirut bombing we, again, went to the host government and said this is obviously not the first time we've expressed to them our concern about...about our security in their country and we asked that they provide better protection for us along the perimeter of our embassies, our office building, that they change traffic patterns so that vehicles will not have the same opportunity to either park near our buildings or get a running start on them.

CHASE: Every American Embassy took immediate measures in an effort to stop the suicide driver bomb threat. Here in Paris a simple system is used. After each vehicle exits from the embassy, a staff car pulls in place to block off the driveway. And outside the American Embassy in Rome another concern--a man stood sketching the road system in front of the main entrance. When Italian police asked what he was up to, he claimed he was drawing the scene of a recent

car accident. This is the type of suspicious incident embassy security guards must look out for to try to prevent anyone from plotting the route for a suicide driver.

CHASE: But a suicide driver was able to get through to our embassy in Kuwait--something U.S. intelligence had been warning about for months. Now six people were dead. PHILIP GRIFFIN (CHARGE D'AFFAIRES KUWAIT): An open truck, moving at high speed, smashed through the gates of the embassy at approximately 9:30 a.m. and then it detonated.

CHASE: It turned out that our embassy had made requests for money to improve security there for three months prior to the bombing. Those requests were sent to Gordon Harvey in Washington. It sounds to me like what happened was the request for the improvements got tied up in red tape and I'm sure that everybody here is very sorry that that happened. What steps have been taken that that doesn't happen again? GORDON HARVEY (NO FURTHER IDENTIFICATION): Since the Kuwait bombing we have put together a task force which meets every day and has considered all of the telegrams that come. A number of cables came in after that requesting funds for additional improvements. We have approved them all. DENNIS HAYS (FOREIGN SERVICE ASSOCIATION): It takes money. It takes time to build these things. But what we're saying is let's do them and let's do them as fast as we can because we can't afford another Kuwait, another Beirut.

CHASE: So how do we stop the suicide truck bomber? As this test crash footage illustrates, concrete barriers can stop a small truck. And now a new technology--steel, web shaped barriers built into the ground that are capable of stopping even the largest trucks. The barriers are made here, outside Los Angeles. They are driven by hydraulic arms that can raise the wedge from ground level to 30 inches high in less than two seconds. The wall goes up automatically if a vehicle approaches the embassy at high speed.

CHASE: Just last month outside the American Embassy in Rome, construction was underway to set similar steel barriers in place and when we returned there last week the construction had already been completed. Three smaller wedges with spaces for pedestrians to walk through were right there in place.

CHASE: And to keep back mob violence--stronger fences, anti-personnel barriers. The manufacturer of a new kind of barbed wire demonstrated for us the ease with which standard barbed wire can be crossed. Here at the *Man Barrier Factory in Connecticut they manufacture miles of flexible metal with razor sharp barbs on each side and when it is crossed the barbs will bend inwards and attack the leg. They also make a product called "instant barrier". It allows an embassy to pull it out only when it's needed, within just a matter of minutes. The State Department is already one of their biggest customers and we saw plenty of their product used to channel people off the main street and away from our new embassy in Beirut. GORDON HARVEY: The difficulty is that probably no two of our buildings are the same. In one location (screen reference made to Honduras) we have the ideal site to secure. We have the embassy in the middle of the compound, we have space that's under our control, we have a high wall, we have gates, we have systems that we can use to protect the site. In another location, Damascus, our building's right on the street itself. Everybody can drive by and they're 15 feet from the building. KUPPERMAN:

Fundamentally you need some distance...considerable distance between a gate, we'll say, and the building itself. If you have that you can put up tank traps, you can put up barriers forcing people to go in, say, a zig zag path and if they're suspicious at all, you know, you take them out literally with a small rocket.

CHASE: What you are seeing is the security surrounding our new embassy in Beirut. Americans moved here after last year's embassy bombing. And even though most of the staff has now been evacuated, those 200 Marines are still in place. Security here remains tighter than at any embassy in the world. The street out front has been closed off to general traffic and all vehicles with specific business here must be thoroughly inspected. The Marines have built a bunker at the single entrance to the embassy and an amphibious tank provides double protection there. Not only is the U.S. Embassy heavily guarded, but our troops also man positions near the British Embassy just down the block. Here a wire mesh net drapes the entire building to ward off grenade and mobile rocket attacks. HAYS: We have taken a lot of steps to protect the ambassador. The difficulty now is that because of this extra protection the terrorist have changed their sights. And a terrorist says, 'if I can't get the ambassador then I'll get the political officer. And if I can't get the political officer maybe I'll go after the Marine guard'...whoever...whoever they can get.

CHASE: And if they can't get the Marine guard they go after a wife or child?
HAYS: I hope to God it doesn't come to that.

CHASE: At the State Department in Washington, a seminar for all Foreign Service employees and their families. They're instructed how to drive through a roadblock, how to recognize bombs, how to survive as a hostage--in effect, how to prepare for the worst. AMBASSADOR STEPHEN LOW (FOREIGN SERVICE INSTITUTE): We suggest that they work out their legal problems, their particular signatures are necessary, that they deal with insurance where payments may be necessary, that they leave their papers in good order in known places and we give them a whole list of the kinds of things they can do before they leave, while at their post and if they are separated from their spouses.

CHASE: And listen to their question. What becomes clear is that members of the Foreign Service are extremely concerned about their safety. UNIDENTIFIED MALE SPEAKER: You say that the position of the U.S. government is that it will not negotiate. What does that mean to me if I or a member of my family is taken hostage? UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE SPEAKER: Why'does it take us so long to close an embassy in a country that is obviously getting very heated? Why don't we get out sooner before there's a tragedy?

CHASE: There are no easy answers. So today our diplomatic posts around the world continue to do the only thing they can do--put their people through elaborate security measures. Our embassies, once the very symbols of freedom and openness to the rest of the world, have been forced into closing their doors. HAYS: We're going to run out of embassies before they run out of fanatics and we've got to look at the long run here. We've got to be...do what we can to protect ourselves tomorrow and a year from now and 10 years from now or else the diplomacy as we know it and as I think it has to be, is going to fade away.

CHASE: The security measures are very costly. This month we've learned the State Department is expected to ask Congress for millions more dollars to beef up security. But the real cost may be to the image of America as an open, effective nation.

DOWNS: And these incidences are no longer a matter of isolated zealots. These are the acts of nations and they're operating under whole new rules.

CHASE: That's what the diplomatic sources say--that these bombs are too sophisticated to be an informal affair.

DOWNS: You know, when I think of it, I have to admire Americans who hold these posts because there was a time when a lot of people considered an ambassadorship kind of soft duty. Would you accept an ambassadorship at this point?

CHASE: Well, the president hasn't asked me. But these people hold positions of high honor and I think they deserve the best that we can afford to give them.

DOWNS: I think so too. Thank you, Sylvia.