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11 March 1975

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Coup Attempt in Portugal

1. We do not as yet have a complete picture of the abortive coup attempt or military uprising that occurred today in the outskirts of Lisbon. It now looks as though a badly organized effort by moderates or conservatives has been suppressed. The next cause for concern is how far the leftists go in exploiting the episode.

Situation as of 1700 EST

2. The best information indicates that a paratroop unit stationed at Tancos--about 60 miles northeast of Lisbon--moved by helicopter to attack the artillery unit headquartered near the Lisbon airport. After a brief period of fighting, the paratroopers were apparently convinced of the fruitlessness of their cause and loyal troops took control of the airport area. There have been unconfirmed reports that units from the cavalry school at Santarem and perhaps the commandos at Amadora were also involved. As of 1700 EST all military activity appeared to have ceased.

3. Although military leaders have requested that the people stay off the streets and "remain vigilant", various political parties have urged their followers to come out and support the "alliance between the people and the Armed Forces Movement." A group of people gathered at the headquarters of the Republican National Guard in downtown Lisbon where the head of the National Guard had reportedly been taken prisoner by more conservative officers. Latest reports indicate that the commander has been released and that General

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Damiao, former head of the National Guard and a Spinola supporter, was placed under arrest after trying to take over the National Guard. Also under arrest is Colonel Durao, another Spinola confidant and commander of the Tancos paratroopers, as well as at least three other military officers.

4. There have been reports of extreme leftwing groups gathering in parts of Lisbon, as well as other major Portuguese cities. Portuguese police have been fearful that some groups might head for the US embassy. Embassy reporting at 1815 Lisbon time indicated that they had received protection from military police forces and that streets within one block of the embassy had been sealed off.

5. We have since received more ominous press reports that by nightfall large crowds of demonstrators had gathered in several areas of Lisbon, and radio and television stations were relaying reports of where moderate and rightist military officers and politicians could be found. In Oporto demonstrators are reported to have wrecked the headquarters of the conservative Social Democratic Center party as well as the local office of its electoral ally, the Christian Democratic Party.

Possible Interpretations and Repercussions

6. Most of the officers arrested so far in connection with the abortive uprising have been linked in the past with conservative former president General Spinola. According to press reports, Lisbon radio has reported Spinola, his family, and several of his close collaborators have taken refuge in Spain. Despite Spinola's apparent implication, however, it is not clear which of the various groups known to have been plotting actually decided to move.

7. The units involved--the Tancos paratroopers, and possibly elements from the cavalry school at Santarem and the commando unit at Amadora--have been noted in previous reporting as prepared to offer support to various rightist plots. Support from other units believed to be under the command of moderate officers failed to materialize. Even the majority of the air force, generally believed to be more conservative than the other services, rallied to the support of the government.

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8. This failure of any significant support to develop suggests that the abortive effort was carried out by a small group of desperate men who may have hoped that a move on their part would galvanize other moderate forces into action. Another possibility is that the Tancos unit jumped the gun in a plot that was supposed to involve others, or that officers who had previously committed themselves simply backed out at the last minute.

9. Another possible explanation for the events is that rightist military units were misled or otherwise provoked into action by leftist elements who were fearful of the moderates' resurgence that has become increasingly evident in recent days. There is no evidence to back up this hypothesis, but this poorly organized and unsuccessful coup attempt has clearly played into the hands of the left at a time when the moderates appear to have much to lose.

10. By rallying to the defense of the Armed Forces Movement, moderate officers may have succeeded to some extent in protecting their position. Moderate political parties have demonstrated that they too are aware of the leftist backlash that could follow. The Popular Democratic Party was the first party to publicly and officially denounce the action.

11. Despite these efforts to salvage something from a bad situation, AFM and civilian moderates of the movement will now hesitate to challenge the current leadership. Any plan, for instance, to unseat the radicals in the Movement's Coordinating Commission through the use of democratic procedures at the next meeting of the Movement's general assembly will probably be shelved.

12. A more frightening--but possible--scenario could see moderates, cowed by the ease with which the coup attempt was thwarted and the threat to call large numbers of civilian demonstrators into the streets, cooperating in widespread arrests of suspected rightists and a postponement of elections. Spokesmen for the radical wing of the Movement, including Prime Minister Goncalves, have already called on those who support the AFM to be prepared to demonstrate that support in the streets and have promised that the "revolution" will now proceed uninhibited.

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13. Conflicting messages to the public, such as Minister Without Portfolio Vitor Alves' reassurances and his call for civilians to remain at home and stay calm, suggest that the left has not yet tightened its grip and that divisions remain within the AFM leadership.

14. Leftists will undoubtedly charge the US with some involvement in or foreknowledge of today's events. A first indication of this was General Carvalho's statement in answer to reporters' questions that it "might be a good idea if US Ambassador Carlucci" were recalled. Carvalho's statement does not necessarily reflect the view of the Portuguese government.

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