

Sabre rattling in

South Atlantic

Argentine options limited on Falklands

By David Cross

In spite of the growing tensions between Britain and Argentina over the Falkland Islands, the 2,000 or so islanders have so far limited their anti-Argentine protests to a few pro-British slogans.

In the most notable incident an intruder broke into the Argentine airline office in Port Stanley and covered the Argentine flag with a Union Jack. Before leaving he wrote "tit for tat" in toothpaste on one of the desks in a reference to the incident which provoked the current confrontation — the raising of the Argentine flag on the dependency of South Georgia by a group of Argentine scrap merchants.

Another slogan sprayed outside the airline office reads: "UK-OK".

The airline office has become the focus of protests because it is the most obvious symbol of Argentina's claim to sovereignty of the group of islands which have been a British colony for the past 150 years. Under a communications agreement concluded by the British and Argentine governments in 1971, Buenos Aires runs the only regular air service linking the islands with the outside world.

Each week a Fokker Friendship F27 or F28 aircraft, with seats for about 50 passengers on board, runs a weekly or twice weekly service between Port Stanley and Comodoro Rivadavia on the coast of Argentina. The aircraft also bring mail and regular supplies of fresh fruit to supplement the spartan diets of the islanders.

The 1971 agreement, which also covers educational, medical and customs links between the islands and Argentina, laid down arrangements for Argentines and Falkland Islanders travelling to and from the islands. The Argentine authorities issue them with special travel permits entitling them to free movement both on the mainland and on the islands.

The other main agreement between Britain and Argentina entitles the Argentines to supply petrol and aviation fuel to the Falkland Islanders. Under the terms of the 1974 pact, petroleum supplies are brought from the mainland and stored on tanks on the island.

Otherwise in spite of efforts by both the British and Argentine Governments to strengthen economic and political links between the islands and Buenos Aires, ties between the islanders and the Argentina remain tenuous. The occasional Argentine cruise ship calls at Port Stanley during the summer months but leaves after passengers have bought their supply of duty-free whisky, while a few children study at the British school in Cordoba in central Argentina.

With the exception of the few supplies brought in by aircraft, the vast majority of Falkland Islands trade is still with Britain by sea. The cargo ship Aes travels to and from Tilbury four times a year carrying wool to Britain and taking supplies of all kinds to keep the Falkland Islands economy ticking over.

Telephonie and telex links also bypass Argentina, being transmitted by satellite via the British Cable and Wireless Company.

If the crisis escalates, there is, therefore, little the Argentines can do to make life unpleasant for the islanders — short of a full-scale invasion.

The most Argentina seems able to do is to stop the mail and prevent passengers from travelling to and from the islands.

In the meantime, according to the daily telex messages which pass between the Falkland Islands and its office in London, the latest confrontation has served to heighten the apprehensions of the islanders towards Britain's defence commitment.

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