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## Serious Fighting in Falklands May Come By This Weekend, U.S. Officials Fear

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WASHINGTON — Reagan administration officials fear that new, more serious fighting between Britain and Argentina may break out by the weekend if a diplomatic solution isn't reached by then in the Falkland Islands dispute.

If battles begin on the two main islands or the seas around them, officials say, it is likely the U.S. would abandon its posture of neutrality and openly support Britain. However, these foreign policy and defense officials caution that President Reagan hasn't made a final decision, and they predict the U.S. will avoid any direct military role.

U.S. fears of new fighting intensified yesterday, officials said, after American intelligence officials reported to the administration that Argentina has sent one of its submarines into the British-declared 200-mile "exclusion zone" with orders to sink British ships. The submarine mission has come in retaliation for Britain's recapture Sunday of tiny South Georgia Island, a remote part of the Falklands group.

The administration also suspects that a small team of British commandos may land on the Falklands in the next few days, even before the main British fleet arrives in the area, to try to disable the islands' sole airstrip.

U.S. officials fear that if broader fighting breaks out, serious negotiations aren't likely to resume until one side or the other gains an upper hand militarily. For that reason, the administration was straining yesterday to breathe new life into its negotiating effort.

The State Department said it was "in close touch" with both the British and Argentine governments. Argentine Foreign Minister Nicanor Costa Mendez continued to put off a meeting with Secretary of State Alexander Haig.

But U.S. officials said that other channels of communication were being used to relay the latest U.S. peace proposals, hammered out in a meeting with British Foreign Minister Francis Pym in Washington last week.

It isn't known what formed the basis of the intelligence report that Argentina has dispatched a submarine into the war zone. However, administration sources have hinted in recent weeks that Argentina's military communications are being intercepted by American intelligence. The submarine report was presumably shared with Britain, which has access to much U.S. intelligence under long standing agreements.

U.S. officials say they don't know of any British surface ships that are currently in the exclusion zone around the main Falklands, though British nuclear-powered submarines are said to be patrolling there.

However, British ships could be in the area by the time an Argentine submarine could get there. Several British warships are in the vicinity of South Georgia, 800 miles away. And the vanguard of the 75-ship main British fleet heading for the islands could arrive as early as Thursday, according to U.S. officials.

In Sunday's brief battle, Argentina lost one of its four submarines, a World War II-era U.S.-built craft. A second such submarine is inoperable as well, U.S. intelligence believes. That leaves Argentina with two German-built diesel submarines, equipped with torpedoes, that were commissioned in 1974.

Though Pentagon experts rate British anti-submarine defenses highly, they say an Argentine craft could slip into the British fleet and sink a ship.

Even if Argentina doesn't initiate new hostilities in the next few days, the British fleet might. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has warned that the British navy can't delay for long once it reaches the islands in force, because the region's brutal winter weather is beginning. U.S. officials say the area had snow and 40-mile-an-hour winds yesterday.

According to U.S. officials, the first wave of British troops, 1,500 men aboard the aircraft carrier Hermes, isn't likely to reach the immediate Falklands area until Friday. Some days behind is the passenger ship Canberra, carrying 2,400 troops. A third ship, with 900 troops, has just left Britain. U.S. sources say Britain may bring the force to nearly 6,000 by dispatching another 1,000 troops shortly.

However, U.S. military analysts predict that, before any large number of troops or planes is committed, Britain will attempt to disable the airfield at Port Stanley, of East Falkland.

This could be done by a raiding party of commandos, who could be landed by submarine. A commando party was landed on South Georgia to perform reconnaissance before Sunday's British attack, and some British sources say a similar scouting party may already be on the Falklands.