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15 May, 1989

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

Dear Assistant Secretary

Lunch with Peter Murtagh, The Guardian

Formerly with the Irish Times, Murtagh moved four years ago to the Sunday Times and, more recently, to the Guardian where he has just been appointed Assistant Foreign Editor.

The following points of interest arose:

Gibraltar

- Murtagh spent a week in Spain in March investigating the claims made about Spanish police surveillance of the Gibraltar trio. As indicated in the piece which he published on 25 March, he concluded that all the evidence supports the Spanish version of events and that the document on which the British case essentially rests is of questionable value.
- The most interesting piece of evidence which Murtagh picked up in Spain, but which he could not corroborate (and therefore did not publish at the time), was that Spanish policemen reportedly observed two people handling timing devices near the docks in Valencia (where, it is now accepted, the explosives were imported). The identity of the two was not clear - they could have been two of the Gibraltar trio or else part of the back-up team now believed to have arranged the car transport. The significance of this evidence, if it could be firmly corroborated, is that any prior knowledge of timing devices (which the Spanish police would presumably have passed on to their British colleagues) would undermine the British claim that the SAS action was necessary in order to prevent activation of a remote-controlled device.
- The Spanish authorities have been noticeably reticent about defending their end of the operation. While he was in Spain, Murtagh heard a

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number of explanations for this, including the following:

- British intelligence is believed to have learned about an operation last year in which Spanish undercover agents kidnapped a number of ETA members in south-west France and took them back to Spain. A threat to expose this reportedly made the Spanish authorities more cooperative in relation to Gibraltar.
- At a more mundane level, senior Spanish police officers are reportedly anxious to avoid a Spanish-British row over the Gibraltar shootings which might mar Spain's current Presidency of the Trevi Group and hinder moves towards closer cooperation between European police forces. The commendations conferred on the 22 Spanish policemen involved in the Gibraltar operation should have assuaged sensitivities within the police force.
- The view of most people in Britain, Murtagh believes, is that the Prime Minister authorised the operation from the outset. It is equally expected, however, that she will under no circumstances permit a fuller inquiry than that offered by the inquest. Unless there is a major revelation showing her hand in the affair, public interest in it is likely to wane. The Guardian, one or two other papers and Thames TV will continue to research it, in particular the Spanish angle, but they will have to reckon with growing scepticism on the part of Editors.

Northern Ireland lawyers

- Recalling David Hearst's suggestion in an article some time ago that NI lawyers pay a portion of their fees to paramilitary organisations in order to secure briefs, Murtagh said that Hearst picked this up in a conversation with RUC sources shortly after the murder of Pat Finucane. He was critical of his colleague for having swallowed this line. He himself has had contact with Paddy McGrory in relation to Gibraltar and is aware of the acute danger faced by McGrory and others since the Finucane killing. Lord Gifford wrote an impressive letter rejecting Hearst's claim (which the Guardian published) and the paper itself, anticipating a rumoured legal action (which, however, has not materialised), printed what amounted to a retraction of the claim.
- Murtagh mentioned, in conclusion, that Hearst will probably be leaving Northern Ireland this summer. His replacement is likely to be Owen Bowcott, who has deputised for Hearst from time to time.

Yours sincerely

David Donoghue

David Donoghue
Press and Information Officer