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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH

ANGLO-IRISH SECRETARIAT

BÉAL FEIRSTE

BELFAST

CONFIDENTIAL

20 June 1990

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

Dear Assistant Secretary

Briefing by British Army

The British side of the Secretariat have arranged occasional formal briefings by the British Army from time to time (the most recent was in September 1988). A briefing was proposed for me after my arrival here in January and after some delays and rearrangements, it was given yesterday afternoon. The briefing is the standard presentation given to newcomers including senior members of the press. Although much of the content was already known to us, it was interesting to receive a direct sense of current British Army preoccupations; and, of course, we took the opportunity to put a number of our concerns directly to the Army authorities at the highest level. Although the exchanges were at times firm, they were always mild-mannered and courteous.

The General Officer Commanding the British Army in Northern Ireland, Sir John Waters, attended throughout. The Commander of the UDR, Brigadier Charles Ritchie, was also present. Senior Assistant Commissioner David Cushley attended from the RUC. The briefers were Col. David Strudley and Major Robert Edmundson Jones. I was accompanied by Mr. Ryan and Mr. Harwood.

The briefing took the usual form of the British Army's formal duties in Northern Ireland, casualty lists, assessment of republican and loyalist paramilitary threats, and so on. The following were points of interest.

Political Talks

You may recall that when I met Sir John Waters in January shortly after my arrival here, he expressed deep scepticism

about the possibility of political progress (my letter of 30 January). In the formal circumstances of yesterday's meeting the General was more reticent. He did indicate, however, that his views had not changed; certainly, he expressed no optimism concerning Mr. Brooke's efforts or, in response to my question, on the possibility of a rethink in Sinn Fein/IRA circles.

Stevens Inquiry

The Army officers went out of their way to emphasise "contrary to some reports" that they had no quarrel with Stevens, that they had already taken steps to implement some of his recommendations before they were issued, for example, on screening of the UDR, and that they were looking positively at all of his recommendations, assessing them in the context of practicality and available resources with a view to implementation. Nonetheless, behind the positive and polite attitude adopted to Stevens, there was a clear determination that the Army itself would decide what it would or would not do; and there was little concrete information offered on changes in Army procedures. In response to our questions about screening of the UDR, the officers would not be drawn any further than to say the following:

- decisions regarding the recruitment of UDR candidates had always been a matter for Army Headquarters rather than for the UDR itself;
- there had been a considerable increase in staff (to 11) of the UDR screening unit at Army Headquarters;
- there always had been a police involvement in the process but this had been put on a new basis.

Brigadier Ritchie said there could be many borderline cases of men who had criminal records but who had turned over a new leaf or who, in any event, had no paramilitary associations. General Waters intervened to say that granted the catchment group of the UDR (i.e. working class and rural Protestants) it would always be difficult to rule out the possibility of some relationship or association with persons involved in paramilitary activity. Both he and Brig. Ritchie insisted, however, that the policy was that if in doubt, the Army did not recruit or retain a person falling under suspicion. Again in response to our question, Brig. Ritchie said emphatically that association with an organisation such as Ulster Resistance would be regarded as a bar to recruitment to the UDR and retention in it. (You may recall the members of the UDR (Hicks brothers) who were seen putting up Ulster Resistance posters in Co. Tyrone some time ago but who did not seem to be found by the Army to be so associated).

Role of the UDR/Issue of Plastic Bullets

I said that, as the officers were well aware, in our view the role and basis of the UDR was open to question. I did not propose to expand on that issue now but I did want to raise a number of particular questions.

I said that we had been appalled by the decision to issue plastic bullets to the UDR, that it was inevitable that we should wonder why this decision had been taken after twenty years of UDR existence, inevitable also that we should be deeply worried about the impact on community relations of any use of plastic bullets by the UDR, and concerned whether the decision did not portend an inclination towards increasing use of the UDR in nationalist areas and, indeed, contrary to established policy, for crowd control and anti-riot purposes.

General Waters said it was dismaying that I could express these views with obvious sincerity. It was very unfortunate that such misunderstanding should exist between friends who shared a common aim of defeating terrorism. He said he was personally associated with the decision to issue plastic bullets. There was no question of any change in the role of the UDR; they would not be used in riot situations and no training was provided to them for such a purpose. The decision had been taken only for the purpose of avoiding situations where the sole alternative would be to use live ammunition in defence of life or equipment. I pointed out that one of the more unexpected statistics in Northern Ireland (from a nationalist point of view) was that the UDR had been responsible for only seven fatal casualties out of a total of more than two and half thousand. Surely, one of the reasons for this was that the UDR had not been put in situations where the use of live ammunition would be even considered? General Waters did not give any convincing explanation as to why the policy had changed. He again mentioned one or two cases recently where the UDR had felt under threat from hostile crowds; and he referred to a separate incident at Cappagh, Co. Tyrone, which could have justified the use of plastic baton rounds. The reason in the Cappagh case was that a UDR unit had lost a very sensitive piece of equipment now carried by all soldiers (he gave no details - he may have been referring to a radio jamming device). The piece of equipment had been recovered. But what would have happened in circumstances where the UDR had tried to force its recovery from hostile hands? It would be simply appalling if sensitive equipment - which he again emphasised was carried by all soldiers - fell into the hands of the IRA.

(Comment: I recall General Waters laying stress on this point at my previous meeting with him in January, although he did not then mention the background to the Cappagh incident. We were left with the impression that the possibility of loss of sensitive electronic equipment by UDR soldiers was an important factor in the decision to issue plastic bullets.)

In response to our question, the officers said that to the best of their knowledge there had been no issue of plastic bullets to the UDR other than on the single occasion at Coalisland on 31 December of which we were informed.

I drew attention to the importance of police accompaniment of the UDR and noted to Mr. Cushley that we were awaiting a follow-up from the police to Mr. Annesley's presentation at the last Conference.

● IRA Threat

The assessment of the IRA threat followed the same lines as that given by General Waters to me in January. The IRA is increasingly sophisticated, capable of undertaking operations simultaneously in Northern Ireland, Britain and the Continent, and capable at any time of inflicting casualties sufficient to cause the sort of outcry and political reaction which followed the Ballygawley bombing in 1988. I drew attention to the decrease in fatalities in Northern Ireland, especially among the security forces, in the last 18 months; but in the view of General Waters, which was strongly echoed by his fellow officers, it is simply a matter of luck that many more casualties and serious incidents have not occurred. The officers referred repeatedly to the intelligence shown in the planning, equipping and executing of IRA operations. They noted, for example, that in Northern Ireland last Thursday there had been no fewer than 18 bomb scares involving Belfast and the Dublin/Belfast railway line. All of these had proven to be hoaxes and the IRA operation had not received a great deal of publicity; but the city had virtually ground to a halt.

The officers' assessment was that IRA units in Belfast and in East and Mid-Tyrone are self-sustaining in the sense that personnel are not required from other parts of Northern Ireland or from the South. In all other areas, however, the border is used as a "resource" for movement of personnel; and in all cases, in the Army view, IRA units are supplied from the South. In this respect, the officers repeated the views which are well-known to you about the desirability of direct communication between the British Army and the Garda and our Army, additional facilities for overflights, surveillance in certain border areas, extradition handover points, and the use by paramilitaries of cross-border roads, such as BCPs 114/5 which had been used in the Derryard attack. Mr. Ryan is reporting directly to the Department of Justice on the detail of this part of the conversation.

In regard to cross-border roads, I said we were of course conscious of the security threat, and we were conscious also of the political problem faced by NIO Ministers. But, there was a political problem in the South also brought on by the inconvenience and economic hardship caused by closures - which had played a part, for example, in the decline of the entire town of Clones, Co. Monaghan. Sinn Fein and the IRA fed off the discontent and resentment the closures engendered; and portrayed themselves as the only ones willing to help the people, hence their recent border roads campaign. I said that within the security and political parameters on both sides, it should be possible to consider opening a very limited number of roads, e.g., in the Clones area and in Co. Leitrim which had no cross-border road open at the present time. I noted that all of this was being studied by the police on both sides and that we hoped they would be in a position to give their views shortly. Mr. Cushley intervened to suggest the RUC saw little prospect of re-opening any roads.

The officers gave full attention to our comments but we were left with the impression that their view is that there is no real pressure for the opening of roads and that the issue is being whipped up and manipulated by Sinn Fein.

Delays at British Army Checkpoints

We raised the question of lengthy delays at British Army checkpoints, such as Kilturk, Mullan Bridge and Gortmullan in Co. Fermanagh. We noted that we had received a string of complaints of lengthy delays at checkpoints in the Fermanagh border area since the beginning of the year. We emphasised that the delays of which we were speaking were regular and lengthy and that we would not, for example, be making representations about an isolated delay of ten minutes. We also noted that we were puzzled at the lack of reaction through the Secretariat to our representations. The ensuing conversation was not very satisfactory but the following points emerged:

- The Army itself and the Army civil representative, Ms. Taplin, who was also present, said that they had received no complaints directly themselves until we had started to make them. This was not said in any way to suggest that we were being used by malcontents or IRA elements, and it was accepted that there was a problem.
- The problem seems to have arisen because of the Army's anxiety about PVCs since the successful IRA attack on Derryard PVC last December which resulted in Army fatalities. In the aftermath of that attack, personnel at PVCs in the Fermanagh area were taking extra precautions for understandable reasons.
- Although they did not say so explicitly, we carried away the impression that we have gained in other conversations that the Derryard incident renewed a debate within the Government about the usefulness of PVCs. As you know, the British Army view is that they are a waste of resources and a risk to soldiers, whereas the NIO view is that they are required if only as a political or psychological reassurance to Unionists in isolated border areas. We suspect that in current circumstances the Army is not willing to deploy extra resources in order to deal with delays that may arise.
- General Waters commented that in the cases I had mentioned there was also a physical problem regarding the width of the road which, he thought, although he was not categorical about this, did not permit traffic to be processed other than through a single checkpoint. (If you have information which sheds other light on this, it would be useful to have it).
- In regard to the Quinn Quarry at Derrylin, I said to General Waters that surely the arrival and departure of

workers - whatever about commercial traffic - was predictable and that it should be possible to deploy more men for such peak periods?

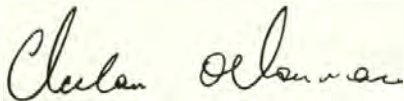
The officers agreed a little reluctantly and under pressure to investigate the matter again but we did not come away with a view that they were likely to take any urgent remedial action. They did, however, express appreciation for information which we have been giving them in recent years about events such as GAA championship matches which cause a predictable build-up of traffic at certain checkpoints including the ones we mentioned.

Complaints

General Waters stressed his anxiety to deal with harassment and to respond quickly to petty complaints (i.e. those falling short of those that would require police investigation for the purpose of possible criminal charges). He read a list of statistics for the last 18 months which showed a very high level of Army response and of complaints sustained. I said we thought progress was being made but it could vary from area to area and the Army should be conscious that many people still thought it useless and even counterproductive to complain. I mentioned the care we took to filter complaints coming to us in Dublin - we were not a post-office box and frivolous or doubtful complaints were not passed on - and referred again to delays we had experienced in getting replies through the Secretariat.

One good point made by the officers present and by the Civilian Representative was that speed in the making of a complaint was all-important. The Army was anxious to respond quickly not only because that made a good impression but also because it became very difficult to get to the bottom of a complaint against a soldier once he had left the North. General Waters added the view that Sinn Fein had a policy of getting people to put in complaints weeks or months after the event for the purpose of making the Army look unwilling or unable to deal with complaints.

Yours sincerely



Declan O'Donovan
Joint Secretary