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AMBASÁID NA hÉIREANN

AMBASSADE D'IRLANDE EMBASSY OF IRELAND
Vienna

Secret

1 March 1989

Mr. Padraig Murphy
Assistant Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs
Dublin

Dear Padraig,

who?

I refer to your letter of 12 December requesting me to raise with the Czechoslovakian authorities on my next visit to Prague the question of Semtex, the plastic explosive which has been found in Ireland by our security forces. This request did not take me by surprise as I had asked Anglo-Irish Division last September when on home leave whether I should raise this matter in Prague. The advice at that time was not to take up the matter.

My first visit to Prague since the receipt of your letter was last week when I raised the matter on 23 February with Mr. Vanicek, Director of the Third Territorial Department of the Foreign Ministry which deals with Britain, Ireland, a number of western European countries as well as USA and Canada. As I was meeting Mr. Sadovsky, First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs immediately afterwards, I also discussed the matter with him. Your follow-up letter of 2 February and the enclosures thereto regarding the British and Community approaches to the Czechs during the month of January had reached me in time and proved quite useful.

In the course of my introductory remarks I referred to the joint démarche made by the EC Presidency in Prague on 26 January on behalf of the Twelve. While Ireland was, of course, associated with and covered by that démarche, what I was about to say was on behalf of Ireland where significant amounts of Semtex had been found. The Irish authorities were, of course, seriously

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concerned that this dangerous material was getting into the wrong hands. We would like to see all plastics explosives, including Semtex, properly controlled and made more easily detectable. I left with him a copy of the editorial carried by the Irish Times on 14 January 1989 under the heading "The Semtex Source".

Mr. Vanicek served at the Czechoslovak Embassy in London before taking up his present position. He was therefore reasonably familiar with the Irish scene because of the fact that their Embassy in London is also responsible for Ireland. My reference to the EC démarche of 26 January prompted his first comment. The Czech side was very surprised by the Twelve approach because of the discussions which commenced in Prague on 6 January with the British, were taken up again in Paris by Foreign Minister Johanes and British junior Minister Waldgrave and which led to the dispatch of Czech technical experts to London for talks there on 12 January with British counterparts. Mr. Vanicek said that they had proposed that the British join them in a United Nations initiative that would hopefully result in the establishment of a working group of experts from countries producing plastic explosives with a view to agreement on adding some substance that would make the explosive detectable. In saying this he mentioned several countries currently producing plastic explosives, including USA, Canada, FRG, France, Sweden, Yugoslavia and, I think, Britain itself. In addition to that Czechoslovakia envisaged the establishment of a firm procedure whereby all countries producing plastic explosives would be required to notify the United Nations annually of all exports, indicating the amount exported and names of the importing countries. The UN Register created in this way would then be available for all to examine.

I asked Mr. Vanicek to explain more fully what they had in mind as well as the timing envisaged. Would the initiative be taken at the next General Assembly and if so in which Committee? His reply was that they regarded the Sixth (Legal) Committee as the most suitable starting point and as to timing they had the next General Assembly in mind. Their idea was that the Sixth Committee would consider the matter and agree to the establishment of a working group of experts who, hopefully, would

come up with an agreed proposal on how to make plastic explosives detectable. The UN register was the other aspect of the proposal. Would Czechoslovakia pursue this idea alone at the UN if Britain did not go along with it? Vanicek's answer was in the affirmative but he expressed the hope that not only Britain but also other producer countries would join them.

Mr. Vanicek assured me that Czechoslovakia did not export Semtex for a number of years and has no intention of exporting in the future. They produce just enough for their own internal needs, mainly for mining and quarrying. He would appreciate if we said nothing publicly about the proposed initiative unless and until ^{they} themselves and Britain make an announcement. I asked him if during the time they were exporting Semtex they insisted on an end-use certificate from the importing country.

He professed not to know the answer to that question, saying that this was a query for the Foreign Trade Department. As I had already arranged a meeting in the Foreign Trade Department for the next day I said I would pose that question when I got there. When I did touch on the subject of Semtex exports in that Department Mr. Halama, the official concerned, was unable to give me a definite answer. What he did say was that they were working closely with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on their proposed initiative and that the last exports of Semtex were in 1976. This contradicts the information given by Foreign Minister Johanes to Waldgrave in Paris, as 1982 was the year mentioned.

Mr. Sadovsky, the First Deputy Foreign Minister, was the senior official who received the Spanish Ambassador on 26 January in connection with the Spanish démarche. Curiously the report circulated on 27 January by the EC Presidency summarising the Czech reaction makes no reference whatsoever to Czechoslovakia's contention that Semtex has not been exported for a number of years. This is all the more surprising since this was the Foreign Minister's first line of defence sixteen days earlier in Paris and Vanicek too, on his part, placed a lot of emphasis on this when I spoke to him. When I met Mr. Sadovsky I decided to raise the Semtex subject with him, explaining that I had just been discussing it with Mr. Vanicek. This became our first topic of conversation and lasted a full 10-15 minutes. There was no note of acrimony - that came later when I raised the subject of human rights, as you will see from a separate report - and I formed the clear impression from my conversation

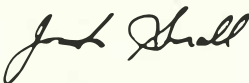
with him and with Mr. Vanicek that they are worried and concerned about the image implications of the Semtex matter, especially since press reports had linked Czechoslovakia indirectly with the PANAM explosion in Scotland.

Mr. Sadovsky repeated that they have not exported Semtex for a number of years; that they certainly do not supply terrorist organisations and that many other countries produce similar explosives. There was, he said, a heavy black market international trade in arms and explosives and plastic explosives like Semtex can therefore get into the hands of the wrong people from many sources. He, too, referred to their proposed initiative, already conveyed to Britain, and said they hoped that Britain would join them in a UN approach.

The new British Ambassador in Prague, Laurence O'Keeffe, who as Head of the British Delegation to the recently-ended CSCE in Vienna is of course well known to me, told me that before a recent ICAO Conference Britain pressed the Czechs very hard both in London and in Prague to send a Minister as Head of delegation. Britain was represented by Paul Channon but in the event Czechoslovakia was represented by its Permanent Representative to ICAO. Apparently it was decided at that meeting that a group of experts should meet in March to examine all aspects of plastic explosives. The British have a strong preference for pursuing this matter through ICAO since it is a technical matter, rather than through the UN where it could get bogged down indefinitely. The Czechs, on the other hand, prefer the UN approach although they have not ruled out the ICAO option completely. My own opinion is that Czechoslovakia is determined to distance itself as much as possible from any links, direct or indirect, with the Lockerbie disaster on 21 December and will try to avoid initiatives taken in an air transport context.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely



Ambassador