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Reference Code: 2021/50/365

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13 February 1996

Mr Sean O hUiginn
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

Mr de Antona
C. Maloney
Mr G. Quinn

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MR. F MURRAY	
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CB SEC 5

Dear Second Secretary

Response of NI security forces to ending of IRA ceasefire

John Steele, head of the NIO's security division, gave us some details today of the measures being taken by the Northern Ireland security forces in response to last Friday's London bomb and the ending of the IRA ceasefire.

There has been a general increase in the level of RUC patrolling. Much of this, Steele admitted frankly, has to do with general profile-raising and "confidence-building" in particular areas and has no real operational purpose.

An exception which he mentioned, however, was the success earlier today of an unscheduled RUC patrol in the Boucher Road area of West Belfast, which intercepted and arrested a group of eight people who were in the course of robbing a total of £2 million pounds worth of cigarettes from a wholesale store. Asking us to treat this information in confidence, Steele said that, according to the RUC, those involved were of the "ODC" variety but had "PIRA overtones" and that the drivers had come from Dublin.

Greater use is being made by police officers of flak jackets and armoured vehicles. There is no general policy in this respect, however; it is the sub-divisional commanders who decide.

Vehicle checkpoints are being mounted on a random basis.

The position regarding security barriers in urban areas is that Group 4, the commercial security firm engaged on a contingency basis by the NIO (following the closure of its own Civilian Search Unit), is on stand-by to perform search duties but has not yet been called in.

A small number of soldiers are to be seen on the streets of Belfast and Derry. Hard helmets are being worn again. As of now, however, there are no plans for wider deployment of the Army.

Security has been tightened in the vicinity of Aldergrove Airport, where soldiers are assisting the police. Otherwise, soldiers are routinely accompanying police patrols only in border areas. They are also being used to reinforce the security of police stations in these areas - and Steele expected that there might be some contact with the public in this connection.

Two Army Battalions which are on reserve in Germany and England respectively (the former trained for an urban environment and the latter for rural deployment) are available to be brought in at 48 hours' notice - the usual period is 7-10 days - to supplement existing troop levels. No decision, however, has been taken to bring either of them in.

Helicopters in South Armagh will be flying "defensively" from now on, which means that they will be flying in tighter formations of 2-3 and at very low altitudes. Steele anticipated that this could give rise to local complaints.

No consideration is being given at present to the possible re-closure of border roads. Steele made clear that official advice would be strongly against this, not least because of the expense incurred over the last year-and-a-half in reopening them. If, however, a full-scale IRA campaign were to resume in Northern Ireland, the closure of some roads would, in Steele's view, be necessary from a "confidence-building" point of view and proposals to this effect would be put to the Irish Government.

Security measures at ports have been increased since last weekend.

The scheduled withdrawal of personal protection from judges, Members of Parliament etc is being reviewed by the RUC. As you know, the Chief Constable's decision to withdraw bodyguards and cars from almost everyone in the relevant categories with effect from 4 March has aroused strong feelings here. John Taylor attempted a specious linkage in Parliament yesterday between the meeting which he and his party leader are being pressed to have with the Tanaiste in Dublin and the threatened removal of their personal protection.

While such posturing would not have gone down well with the Chief Constable, Steele expects nevertheless that the decision will be reversed and that the continuation of personal protection for all the relevant people will shortly be confirmed.

It is worth mentioning in this context that we will be having discussions later in the week with the RUC regarding the security arrangements here at Maryfield.

In general, Steele suggested that the additional security precautions taken since last Friday are not excessive and he remarked on their widespread public acceptance so far. He expressed the private concern, however, that, with the known tendency of the security forces in Northern Ireland to demand (and obtain) ever greater reinforcement of their powers and resources, there could be a steady drift towards a disproportionate response on their part if the situation here were to deteriorate.

I shared Steele's concern and said that a balance would have to be struck between reasonable protection of the public from a renewed and continuing threat and the undoing of all the political benefits obtained from the lowering of the security forces' profile in Northern Ireland over the last seventeen months.

We will have an opportunity to discuss these issues further at the rescheduled meeting of the Stock-take group, which the British hope can be arranged within the next fortnight.

Yours sincerely

David Donoghue

David Donoghue

Joint Secretary

*(New proposed
for 29.2)*