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DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

CIVIL PREPAREDNESS FOR HOME DEFENCE

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Home Department

Shortly after we took office last year I initiated a review of the state of civil preparedness for home defence. I have undertaken to announce the outcome to Parliament soon after the Easter Recess.

2. The preliminary results of the review are contained in the report by officials circulated as OD(80)23. More work remains to be done on the assumptions in the report and on the costing of the options. We also need to ensure that the civil and military aspects of home defence preparedness are consistent. Nevertheless I hope that we can reach some provisional conclusions on the immediate action needed at the OD meeting arranged for 20 March.

3. It is clear to me that our existing plans do not measure up to the possibility of conventional (including chemical) as well as nuclear attack on the United Kingdom and the probability of only a short warning period in which to make final preparations. Since 1968, when civil defence was put on a care and maintenance basis and the Civil Defence Corps disbanded, expenditure has been reduced to about £22m a year (1979 prices) and it has been possible to do little more than preserve the UK Warning and Monitoring Organisation (which would provide warning of attack and information on nuclear fall out), make rudimentary provision for decentralised government after nuclear attack, stockpile food, and promote planning by the local authorities, on whom survival would largely depend. There are no plans for shelter or evacuation of the civil population: there has been no industrial planning, and little effective planning anywhere against conventional attack.

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4. We cannot escape the conclusions that the nation could not be put on a war footing in 7-10 days to meet either conventional or nuclear attack; the essentials to sustain the economy could not be long maintained; the lack of civil protection could seriously weaken public resolve to support the government in a sudden crisis or in war; and these factors must undermine the credibility of our deterrent strategy. These shortcomings have been highlighted by the deterioration in the international situation following events in Iran and Afghanistan. There is increasing concern about civil defence in Parliament and the media, and indeed throughout the country, including many well-informed commentators. Action will be expected to follow the review.

5. The problem is one of resources and it is an interdepartmental one. Although the Home Office has a co-ordinating role, civil preparedness extends far beyond the field of Home Office responsibilities and a number of other Departments are concerned in the options before us.

6. As a bare minimum I believe that we must immediately:

- (a) provide more information and advice on what people can do to help themselves. Placing on sale the booklet "Protect and Survive" will be a step in this direction.
- (b) encourage volunteer effort, not by reviving a national civil defence organisation which would be expensive and bureaucratic but by enlisting the support of existing voluntary agencies and encouraging volunteers within the framework of county and district council planning. This will mean a few more people in the county emergency planning teams to train and organise volunteers.
- (c) increase the effectiveness of the UK Warning and Monitoring Organisation and of the 10,000 volunteers in the Royal Observer Corps who work with it.

7. These measures (which comprise options A and B in paragraph 82 of the Annex to OD(80)23) would cost less than £2m in 1980-81 (since the local authorities would hardly increase their spending before 1981-82), rising to

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£5.4m a year. The local authority share (about a third) would require some central funding. One possibility is to make civil defence an agency service fully reimbursed by central government. Another is to pay an 80% specific grant, but this would mean going back on our undertaking to the local authority associations to end this specific grant; they will not be easily persuaded and will need to be carefully consulted. The remaining expenditure (under (a) and (c) of the order of £1m a year initially) could get under way at once.

8. I do not believe that this minimum programme will be seen as an adequate response to the present situation. Something more will be required. Appendix 2 to OD(80)23 lists a number of measures ranging from comparatively small items like improving the wartime broadcasting system (£1m a year) or enhancing the medical stockpile (£1m) to very large items like comprehensive shelter provision which could cost as much as £15,000m. Other major items, such as industrial planning, have not even been costed at this stage.

9. In the whole of this exercise we are faced with the need for new measures which go well beyond existing expenditure programmes and which are interdepartmental in character. In these circumstances it must be for consideration whether they should be financed from the Contingency Reserve. However, I recognise the difficulty of this and, in view of the urgency of making some immediate response I am ready, if my colleagues insist, to do my best to find the cost of the measures in paragraph 6 from existing Home Office allocations. But even this will be difficult, particularly as the cash limit for 1980-81 is already fixed; and I fear it can only be done by cutting the provision for law and order - which is bound to become public knowledge.

10. I would propose in my statement after Easter to announce that following the completion of the first stage of the review the measures listed in para 6 are being taken and that further studies are continuing. There is bound to be a continuing debate and we shall be criticised for not doing enough. To encourage informed discussion on the possible options carries the danger that it will increase pressure to spend more money; but I think that we must expose in particular the prohibitive cost of any comprehensive shelter policy.

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11. I invite my colleagues to:

- (a) note the preliminary report by officials (OD(80)23) on the state of our civil preparedness;
- (b) agree that after Easter I should announce as an immediate first step the measures in para 6;
- (c) agree that these measures alone are not sufficient and that officials should continue their study with a view to putting forward a further programme on which we can take decisions.

W.W.

Home Office  
Queen Anne's Gate

17 March 1980.

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