

From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
GREAT GEORGE STREET,
LONDON SW1P 3AJ

MOOBA

Yours, now

M Pattison Esq
10 Downing Street
London SW1

1 September 1980

MA

Letter to mine.

Paul

Dear Mike,

... Thank you for your letter of 19 August covering a letter from the group of Fermanagh widows seen by the Prime Minister on 7 July. I attach a draft reply which, as you suggested, has been put in the form of a Private Secretary letter.

My letter of 28 July to Michael Alexander contained a comprehensive survey of security operations in Fermanagh. The only significant change to report is that since then the Secretary of State has authorised, and the security forces have carried out, the closure of two further border roads. Security force activity in the area continues to be intensive and there has certainly not been any change which could be seen as a slackening of effort.

The closure or permanent guarding of more border crossings is kept under review in the light of assessments by the operational commanders on the ground. Undue interference with legitimate cross-border traffic, of which there is a great deal, would be counter-productive, not only economically, but also in security terms in that it would endanger the vitally important co-operation between the RUC and the Garda, as well as that between the respective police forces and the local people whose goodwill they are anxious to retain. Consequently the policy is to close those roads which would give genuine operational benefit.

Permanent vehicle checkpoints are expensive in terms of manpower and support, and it would be impractical to establish them at every open crossing. In some parts of the Province (particularly Londonderry) where traffic is concentrated into a few possible crossings they represent effective border control; but elsewhere, such as in Fermanagh, geography allows relatively easy crossings away from the road. Moreover, the personnel manning permanent checkpoints can be at significant risk both from terrorists firing at the checkpoint from prepared positions in the Republic and from the possibility of ambush on the route to or from the checkpoint.

Although I suggest you avoid being drawn into discussing particular crossings (and the draft has been written accordingly), the road from Newtownbutler to Cavan cited by the widows is a good example of the problems. (Its closure is, incidentally, not a new suggestion: Dr Paisley suggested it to the Secretary of State on



23 June; Mr Molyneaux suggested it in the Emergency Provisions Act renewal debate on 22 July, and since then a deputation of local representatives have also met the local police to ask for it). In the campaign in the late 1950s and early 1960s it carried little traffic and was easily closed. But it now forms one of the main routes in the area between Northern Ireland and the Republic. It accordingly carries a high volume of traffic and serious disruption would ensue if it were blocked. There is little doubt that its closure would have serious effects on our relationship with the Irish authorities. In any case the security forces have found no over-riding security reasons to recommend closure, while a permanent vehicle checkpoint would in itself be unlikely to stop terrorists crossing the border in this area and would itself be vulnerable to attack. The security forces are, however, alert to the possibility that this road might be used by terrorists and considerable attention is paid to it, both overtly and covertly.

Yours sincerely
Mike Hopkins

M W HOPKINS

ADDRESSEE'S REFERENCE.....

To

Mrs H Howe
 Mount Darby
 Roslea
 Co Fermanagh
 Northern Ireland

(Full Postal Address)

Enclosures

Copies to be sent to

(Full Address, if Necessary)

LETTER DRAFTED FOR SIGNATURE BY PS/PRIME MINISTER
 (Name of Signatory)

The Prime Minister has asked me to thank you, Mrs Kernaghan, Mrs Latimer and Mrs Morrow for your letter of 9 August. She has asked me to reply on her behalf.

I can assure you that there has been no slackening whatever in the efforts of the Security Forces in the Newtownbutler area, or indeed anywhere else in Fermanagh. The Police, supported as necessary by the Army, remain dedicated to the elimination of terrorism and they are continuing to take all practicable steps towards this end. The operations of the Security Forces in the area are both real and intensive, ~~and~~ there is a constant refinement of methods to ensure ~~that there is~~ the best possible chance of deterring and arresting those who seek to carry out these terrible deeds. The efforts of the security forces have indeed been paying considerable dividends. ~~As I am sure you will have seen,~~ There has been a significant reduction in terrorist activities in Fermanagh in recent weeks.

The closure of selected border roads is part of a combination of tactics used to deter cross-border terrorist activity. As you will know several further crossings in south east Fermanagh have been

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closed this year where security forces consider that closure will have a significant effect in hampering terrorist activity. The crossings which remain open are kept under constant review and further individual closures can be authorised as and when, in the professional judgement of the Security Forces, such action would have a genuine operational benefit. But closure of all border roads would have a most serious effect on the commercial life of Northern Ireland (as well as that of the Republic) and would also put at risk the vitally important co-operation between the forces of law and order on either side of the border. In the opinion of the security forces, with which the Government agrees, the disadvantages far outweigh the additional security benefit, if any, to be gained from the wholesale closure of border roads.

The effectiveness of permanently guarding open border crossings depends critically on the local circumstances. In some parts of the Province this is a useful tactic. But in places such as Fermanagh the substantial number of security force personnel who would be tied down in such an operation can, in the judgement of their operational commanders, be more effectively used in a mobile role: for instance by setting up surprise vehicle checks over a much wider area. Moreover it must be remembered that a permanent check point itself constitutes a target for the terrorists to attack; there have been several such attacks in the past. Nevertheless, as with the closure of border roads, the question of permanently guarding selected crossings is kept under constant review.

In conclusion the Prime Minister has asked me to say that she ^{shares} ~~appreciates~~ your continued deep concern at the security situation which has had such tragic consequences ^{each of} ~~personally~~ for you ~~all~~. There are no easy or instant solutions, ^{is} ~~But~~ the Government is firmly pledged to bring terrorism to an end whatever the difficulties. ^{in the effort} ~~All~~ ^{Every} possible steps ~~are~~ being taken ^{to} ensure that all the people of Northern Ireland can once again live in peace and free from fear.