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SOUTH ARMAGH AREA REVIEW

When you visited the Ministry of Defence in January, you raised a number of points about security policy in Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to South Armagh which you had visited at Christmas. As was explained in subsequent correspondence between our Private Secretaries, I had already asked Sir Maurice Oldfield and his staff (composed of members of the Army, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the civil service) to carry out reviews of four areas of the Province. The first review, covering South Armagh, has now been finished and I am sure you will want to know Sir Maurice Oldfield's main conclusions and recommendations. The Chief Constable and GOC agree, as I do, with the general thrust of all of them; and the necessary action is being taken.

In co-ordinating the fight against terrorism in Northern Ireland the Security Co-ordinator and his staff have two main, though not mutually exclusive, purposes:-

- a) To produce visible improvements in the short term; and
- b) to develop more effective measures for the long term.

The South Armagh Area

South Armagh is a sparsely populated, largely rural region which takes in some 70 miles of the border with the Irish Republic. A network of minor roads runs through the area; there are over 80 road crossings over the border itself - mostly unapproved for customs purposes, but in practice completely open to traffic. The area is overwhelmingly (though not exclusively) Catholic; and the majority of the population identify ethnically, culturally and politically with the Irish Republic. Republican sentiment is very strong; for all practical purposes the border does not exist in the eyes of the local population.

The area has a long tradition of lawlessness and violence. The forces of law and order have never had an easy task. The "black economy" has always flourished; smuggling, for example, is traditional and is still widely practised today. Active support for terrorist activity is by no means universal, but there is a traditional antipathy towards both the police and the Army. The Army, in particular, are regarded by many as an occupation force. PIRA intimidation is widespread and effective.

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The Role of the Security Forces

Against this background, the Security Forces face a small but experienced and skilled terrorist threat. The major effective terrorist "units" are based in the Republic, where they manufacture explosives, hold weapons, plan attacks and seek safe havens. The prime terrorist aim in South Armagh is to inflict casualties on the Security Forces. The terrorist attacks take 3 forms: (a) on patrols, by remote controlled explosive devices and sniping, (b) on bases, by using mortars, and (c) on individual RUC and UDR personnel, usually off-duty.

In countering these threats, the Security Forces have a difficult and dangerous task. The Army base their units on a number of police stations in the area; these have to be retained, for otherwise the rule of law in South Armagh could not be developed, and it would become virtually a "no-go" area. At the same time, these bases enable the Army to mount aggressive operations, against terrorists moving from the border through the region. Significant intelligence of terrorist plans and operations is only available in the Republic; most Security Force operations are, therefore, speculative rather than based on pre-emptive intelligence.

Cross-border co-operation is, accordingly, particularly crucial in this area. So far as the Garda are concerned, while their overall resources remain limited, their effectiveness is steadily, albeit slowly, improving. The RUC are pleased with the progress recently achieved on the exchange of information and intelligence and with the Garda's anti-terrorist activities in the border areas; but there is no doubt that we must continue to expand our co-operation with the Garda in an unobtrusive and professional fashion.

Recommendations of the Review

The study contains some 70 conclusions and recommendations. I set out the most important below.

- a) The arrangements for the co-ordination of RUC and Army operations against terrorists in South Armagh are now satisfactory.
- b) The defence of police stations is a major commitment for the Army in the area, but abandonment of these stations would be a political and military defeat. The stations also provide the Army with secure bases from which to operate against terrorists; they should be seen as forward operational bases, rather than defensive border forts.
- c) Work is continuing to improve the defence of these stations against the threat of mortar attack. There is also a case for making some overall reduction in the number of soldiers committed to police station guard duties; the Army are now examining this in detail.

- d) The Army's role in Newry could and should be reduced in the near future, with a compensating increase in police strength. The effect of this proposal, taken with reduction referred to in above, would enable soldiers to be used with greater flexibility and to better purpose.
- e) The RUC should continue to play an increasing role in anti-terrorist operations, particularly in the border villages.
- f) In the present circumstances there are good reasons for not making more use of the UDR close to the border.
- g) Co-operation, including the exchange of information, between the RUC and the Garda should be developed as improved.
- h) High priority should continue to be given to R and D on specialist equipment to counter the threat from remote controlled explosive devices.
- i) The activities of civil government in support of the Security Forces should be rationalised and improved.

Many detailed measures are being set in hand to improve the effectiveness of the various elements of the police and Army intelligence effort in the area. Some of these measures will result in a number of soldiers being released from intelligence work for operational duties.

Conclusion

In my view, this South Armagh Area Review has been a valuable exercise. So far as I know, it is the first time that an overall regional approach has been adopted to the structure of security; and I consider the results worthwhile. The study has confirmed that, in the circumstances of the fight against terrorism in the Province, there is no magic formula which would "win the war" for us. Rather, the study confirms that a steady policy of containment and attrition, with opportunities being taken to act offensively against the terrorists wherever possible, offers the Security Forces the best chance of countering terrorist violence. At the same time, efforts must continue to alienate the terrorists from the community. In South Armagh, achievement of this goal is a long way off; but, for the time being, we are doing all we can, within reasonable resource constraints and without exposing our forces to unnecessary risk, to make the going as tough as possible for the terrorists and their supporters.

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I have asked the Security Co-ordinator to continue to work with the Security Forces on the implementation of the recommendations on this, the South Armagh Area Review. The Planning Staff have already started their studies on other key areas of the province. Many of the measures proposed for South Armagh apply directly or indirectly to the whole of the southern part of the province, including East Tyrone and Fermanagh, and are already being implemented by the local police and Army commanders.

Copies of this minute go to colleagues on OD.

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Northern Ireland Office

2 April 1980

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