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MO 19/3

*M*

*Prime Minister*  
The Defence Secretary <sup>intends</sup> ~~intends~~ to take  
a Battalion (ie one out of the thirteen major  
units deployed) out of N. Ireland. The Defence Secretary  
& N. Ireland Secretary will be considering the timing.

PRIME MINISTER

NORTHERN IRELAND FORCE LEVEL

*Print*  
*- 30/4*

You know of my serious concern about the over-commitment of the Armed Forces and its effects upon the manning situation. The major cause is the continuing requirement to provide units for emergency tours in Northern Ireland from both UK Land Forces and BAOR, and for some time I have hoped to be able to make a reduction in the Province. The Northern Ireland Secretary's memorandum for our discussion of Northern Ireland security at OD on 10th July reported that we had commissioned a thorough study of the scope for reducing the force level there.

2. The Working Group set up to carry out this study has concluded that, while from the local security point of view there is no reason to propose a reduction in the number of major units deployed there, a reduction of one unit can be accepted if on wider grounds there is good reason for this change. Such a reduction is, I believe, extremely important in the interests of the Army as a whole and the Northern Ireland Secretary accepts that the security consequences of this change, which will be accompanied by redeployments within the Province, can be tolerated.

3. We have agreed, therefore, that one of the roulement units on 4½ month tours should be withdrawn and it is proposed to do this by not replacing a unit in West Belfast that is due to leave the Province early in February. The gap will be filled by redeployment of both resident and roulement units in the City. You and our OD colleagues will wish to be aware of this intention.

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4. The reduction will of course be noticed and its presentation will have to be carefully handled. I am not sure that it need be formally announced, but we shall have to be ready to confirm it once the intended replacement unit has been told it will not be going. From the Army's point of view this should ideally be done early in November so as to avoid nugatory training by the replacement unit; but I fully recognise that the timing will have to take full account of the latest political and security developments. The Northern Ireland Secretary and I will be considering the presentational aspects and you will be consulted in the normal way before the change is announced or otherwise made public.

5. Copies of this minute go to OD colleagues and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

29th October 1979

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