

CONFIDENTIAL

HL

cc: Robert Armstrong
MOD

file



cc: JOE

DES

HMS

LEO

LOD

SUBJECT

10 DOWNING STREET

13 July 1981

cc Under-Secret

From the Private Secretary

Dear Colin

As you know, the Prime Minister visited New Scotland Yard and Brixton police station between 1930 on Saturday 11 July and 0315 on Sunday 12 July. The visit was generally to brief the Prime Minister on how the Metropolitan Police were handling the civil unrest in London, and on their arrangements for co-ordinating the deployment of police forces throughout the United Kingdom. The Prime Minister did however have long discussions with Sir David McNee and his Deputy and Assistant Commissioners. The following were the main points that were made:

(a) It was taking 12-14 months to bring most offenders before the Crown Courts, even for violent robberies. In exceptional cases, this could be reduced to 4-5 months. This was not satisfactory in present circumstances. Sentences needed to be administered quickly if their impact was not to be lost. The magistrates sitting in special session were doing well, but some of those arrested in the recent riots, and especially the fire bombers, should be brought to early trial in the Crown Courts.

(b) The police also called for greater freedom to arrest those involved in the riots, and possibly special powers to deal with juvenile offenders. The Commissioner felt that powers of arrest such as those in the Riot Act could be appropriate: warning of a state of riot could be announced by loud hailer, and special arrangements could be made to ensure that a magistrate was always on call. At present it was extremely difficult to make arrests, given the speed with which the rioters dispersed.

(c) The Metropolitan Police would welcome early action on certain items of equipment. These are listed in the annex to this letter. The Prime Minister said that she would give her full support to the procurement of this equipment.

(d) The police stressed the need for co-operation from local government and local education authorities. Their schools programme, which involved the briefing of pupils by local police, had run up against opposition in some boroughs.

/ (e)

CONFIDENTIAL

200

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

(e) The reasons for the riots were many and varied. In the case of Brixton, the police felt that the motive was generally criminal, and that the riots usually took the form of looting. In Southall, the problem was different because of the large Asian community. The Prime Minister said that her meeting with community leaders in Southall had given her the impression that there was an Asian "ghetto" in Southall. One of the community leaders had referred to Mrs Gandhi as having made a telephone call to her "Indian subjects" in Southall. The police felt that in general the riots were not being orchestrated by subversive forces. The build-up of publicity had however contributed to the spread of the riots throughout the country and in some cases, precautionary measures, such as the boarding up of shop windows, had invited trouble, and built up hysteria. There was no hard evidence, even in Liverpool and Toxteth, that agitators had been at work. The police were producing a computerised breakdown of those arrested. At the Prime Minister's request, they agreed to include information on whether or not those arrested were employed in this breakdown.

(f) The Commissioner expressed his concern about security arrangements for the Royal Wedding, and especially for the firework display to be held in Hyde Park. The arrangements by which foreign dignitaries would be watching the fireworks from a stand without any cover were especially worrying. He had raised this with H.M. The Queen, but felt that there was a case for reviewing the situation in the light of recent events.

On Sunday morning, the Prime Minister telephoned the Home Secretary to report on her visits. She emphasised the need for early action on equipment for the police and the need to bring some of the rioters before the Crown Courts without delay. The Home Secretary outlined the action already in hand on equipment, and mentioned the possible danger that those brought before the Crown Courts might be acquitted as had happened following the St. Pauls riots in Bristol.

The Prime Minister concluded by saying that she hoped her visit had helped to get across to the police how impressed the Government were with their handling of the situation, and the Government's thanks for their dedication and hard work.

I am copying this letter to David Edmonds (Department of the Environment), Peter Shaw (Department of Education and Science), John Wiggins (HM Treasury), Michael Collon (Lord Chancellor's Office) and Jim Nursaw (Law Officers' Department).

gms
Wilkie Rickett

Colin Walters, Esq.,
Home Office.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

ANNEX

Police Equipment

The Commissioner outlined the needs of the police as follows:

1. Riot shields: the police needed not only riot shields, but a greater variety to deal with different circumstances.
2. Protected vehicles: these would largely take the form of adapted long wheel base landrovers. The Metropolitan Police had sent two officers to Hong Kong, and one to Belfast, to study the protected vehicles used there.
3. Personal fire extinguishers: the distribution of fire extinguishers to the Metropolitan forces following the recent fire bombing had greatly improved morale.
4. Personnel carriers: the Commissioner reported that the Home Secretary had authorised the purchase of 24 diesel transit vans. He hoped that these would be delivered within the next fortnight.
5. CS gas: gas was indiscriminate in its effects, and the Commissioner felt that it should only be used as a last resort. But he agreed that it would be useful if the police could say that they had sufficient supplies available.
6. Truncheons: the Commissioner said that, in his view, the police needed longer truncheons than the standard issue.
7. Rubber bullets (baton round): the Commissioner said that his remarks on CS gas applied equally well to baton round. He agreed with the Prime Minister that it would be useful for the police to have sufficient stocks available.
8. Water cannon: the Commissioner reported that he would be attending a demonstration of water cannon at Cobham on Monday and Tuesday. After some discussion, the Prime Minister said that she felt a minimum of six water cannon should be made available to the police. If possible these should be purchased from British sources. The possibility of using tracked vehicles, which might be more difficult to overturn, should be explored.
9. Fire resistant clothing: the police said they were studying various different types of fire resistant clothing, as well as treatments for fire proofing standard issue clothing.
10. Protective head gear: the police were extremely grateful for the protective head gear that the Ministry of Defence had made available. One problem was that the visors on the helmets supplied provided little protection against incendiary liquids such as burning petrol.
11. Clearance vehicles: the police had been considering the procurement of vehicles specially equipped to remove barricades etc. They did not consider these to be a high priority.
12. Helicopter equipped with Television Surveillance Cameras ("Heli-Telly"): the Commissioner said that an additional "Heli-Telly" would be extremely useful, though he recognised the opposition this would provoke from civil liberties groups and others.

CONFIDENTIAL