

SECRET



5 2
Pine Minister

JH

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE WHITEHALL LONDON SW1A 2HB

TELEPHONE 01-218 9000
DIRECT DIALLING 01-218 2111/3

30/12

MO 19/3

22nd December 1982

Dear Jim

I understand that at your meeting with the Chief Constable and the Commander Northern Ireland on 13th December, you discussed a further reduction of one major unit in the Northern Ireland force level. I am writing now to let you know that this proposal has my full support and to seek your formal agreement that we should go ahead with its implementation. The intention is to make the reduction by not replacing the 3rd Battalion, The Light Infantry when it ends its emergency tour in February 1983.

Although this battalion is currently responsible for the Fermanagh/South Tyrone area, the effect of the force reduction will be spread throughout the Province by redeployments from elsewhere. Furthermore, two relatively recent force adjustments have ensured that the overall effect in terms of the reduction of troops available for operational duties will be much less than it might otherwise have been. First, augmentation of the Maze Prison Guard Force - to enable it to assume the Crumlin Road Prison guarding commitment - has released men from the resident battalion at Aldergrove for more directly operational duties; second, the resident unit in Omagh, which has hitherto been an armoured reconnaissance regiment, has in the past month been replaced by, and will in future be provided by, an infantry battalion which is some 200 men stronger. This means that, after the withdrawal of

1

The Rt Hon James Prior MP

SECRET



3LI, the troops available for operational duties will only be about 350 fewer in total than in late November 82 and the number of infantry units serving in the Province will be the same as the number in October this year (eight). Commander Northern Ireland is considering a redeployment of the UDR to take account of the present operational requirement which will further mitigate the effects of this reduction in Regular manpower.

Although there will be no closures of barracks or bases, existing facilities being used by those troops redeployed into the area (so that there will be no civilian redundancies), the reduction will clearly need delicate handling from the point of view of public perception - not least because of the new Assembly's preoccupations with security matters. We shall do our best to ensure that the reduction and consequential redeployments do not become public knowledge until they have been accomplished, although previous experience has shown that this can by no means be guaranteed. Once you have indicated your formal agreement to this proposal, my officials will discuss with yours the detailed planning of the reduction and the preparation of a defensive press brief for use in the event that the plan becomes public.

I am sending copies of this letter to the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

*Yours ever
John*

John Nott