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Prime Minister 39

The Defence Secretary agrees to an extra battalion for Northern Ireland, but wants it to be only until September, with the RUC taking over more duties.

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SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

FORCE LEVELS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Thank you for your letter of 13th February about the possible deployment of an additional infantry battalion to Northern Ireland from the beginning of March. This would obviously be an unwelcome development both because of its political implications and because of the penalties for other Army commitments. Nevertheless, I fully understand that the Army cannot maintain its present level of assistance to the RUC beyond the end of this month and, in view of the reasons given in your letter that it is not possible to reduce the level of support required by the police at present, I believe there is no alternative to the deployment of another battalion. In particular, I believe that it is important to restore a small element of reserve before the "marching season" gets underway.

2. Nevertheless, we must clearly avoid this becoming an open-ended commitment. The penalties to the Army will become increasingly severe beyond September. We do not want it of be seen in public as a permanent step backwards in the fight



against terrorism and our objective of reducing the level of military support in the Province. It is therefore important that between now and September we should do everything we can to reduce the commitments which the Army is required to undertake. In particular, we must look at the scope for reducing significantly the Army's resources devoted to the close protection of RUC police stations. It is this major new commitment, involving over 100 RUC stations throughout the Province, that is largely responsible for the present 'overstretch'. I fully understand the importance of the commitment in maintaining RUC morale, but I do not agree with your suggestion that this is really a military task. On the contrary, it is a wasteful and restrictive use of military manpower which is most effective when it is not employed on static tasks.

3. Of course, I appreciate that the prospect of expanding the RUC is not an attractive solution, but if additional manpower is necessary in the longer term - and I do not fully share your view that we are faced with a short term problem - this may still be preferable to a permanent increase in Army force levels in the Province. Equally, as noted in the 1984 Security Policy Review, there may be other areas where the police could relieve the Army of static duties. Two possibilities stand out. The first would be the substitution of police for soldiers at some of the Permanent Vehicle Check Points (PVCs) on the border. The second would be the Provision of the Prison Guard Force at



the Maze and Crumlin Road Prisons. The efficacy of a military Prison Guard Force must in any case be called in question by the Solicitor General's recent advice (his letter to you of 31st January) that the circumstances in which a soldier might open fire at an escaping prisoner and be confident that he was acting within the law are very limited indeed. I also gather that a joint official working party is already examining this as one of the remits from the 1984 Security Policy Review and I hope that this will lead to a significant reduction in the level of Army presence at the prisons, although we would probably need to continue to provide a quick reaction force.

4. I hope you will agree, therefore, that the Northern Ireland Office, RUC and HQNI should study urgently ways in which the Army's static commitments in the Province can be reduced and that they should report in time for a full review of force levels in the Summer. The object should be to allow us to withdraw at least one - and ideally both - of the additional battalions by the end of September.

5. Finally, I agree that our Departments will need to coordinate the presentational aspects of the deployment of a further battalion. The low key approach adopted for the first battalion worked well over the New Year as it was generally seen as a prompt and positive response to the pressures caused by the increased effectiveness of the PIRA campaign just before Christmas (and we may also have been helped by the timing of the

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first move over the New Year period); it is unlikely that this approach would be so successful a second time. Nevertheless, I think that we should try to avoid linking this increase to any specific aspect of the security situation, but rather to present it as a prudent precaution in the light of the continuing high level of Army activity in the Province in order to maintain our ability to respond rapidly to any increase in the threat.

6. I am sending copies of this minute to the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the Home Secretary and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

A.Y.

Ministry of Defence
24th February 1986

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