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Prime Minute

Agree to await further report at end of next week?

MS A.S.C. 10/3

PRIME MINISTER

POLICING OF DEMONSTRATIONS AT MILITARY BASES

PM's Box

The Secretary of State for Defence copied to me his minute to you of 2 March about the protection of military bases.

Taking first the perimeter defences, I understand that where barbed wire has been installed it has been effective. Among its other qualities it is an improvement on the existing fence because it is difficult to dig underneath it. I am glad that work on this is being pressed forward quickly. The more barbed wire that can be installed before Easter the better will be the chances of avoiding a newsworthy incursion by large numbers of people either on Maundy Thursday when 1-2,000 women are expected or on Good Friday when CND are hoping to have 80,000 supporters dispersed between Burghfield, Aldermaston and Greenham Common and on a route which links them. It is difficult to assess what will happen at Easter. The large demonstration in December did not include any attempt to copy the incident last summer when a significant stretch of the fence at Greenham Common was torn down. Easter may be as peaceful but because of the potential weight of numbers the police would appreciate any additional insurance that can be taken out. I hope that the entire perimeter might be ringed by an additional barbed wire fence by the end of this month.

A study of the defences at Greenham Common should also consider the gates. Last night 50 women entered the base by simply walking through the main gate which was manned but not adequately to prevent an incursion on that scale. This was a repetition of similar, earlier incursions.

I have looked very carefully at the regular police patrolling by Thames Valley and so far I am not persuaded that the use of additional officers can be justified. The figure of 50-70 officers mentioned in paragraph 3 of the Secretary of State for Defence's minute was an immediate guess by the chief constable at a meeting in the Home Office attended also by a Ministry of Defence official. The chief constable has now provided more carefully calculated estimates of the number of officers who would be needed to make sure that any incursion was immediately detected and the number needed to make it quite difficult for the women to get into the camp at all. His figures are 100 and 200 respectively. Even the larger figure would not guarantee that there would be no incursions. Taking account of shifts, sickness and holidays this would require the allocation of the equivalent of 500 and 1,000 police officers respectively to full-time duty at the base. From a force of just over 3,000 Thames Valley could only manage this by using mutual aid for which they would have to pay. In a full year the cost of the difference between the Thames Valley officers there now and the lower figure of 100 would be about £7m. This compares with the force's overtime budget for 1983-4 of about £3m.

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Quite apart from the cost, there are other reasons for not pressing the chief constable to do more. The Police Authority would be almost certain to criticise vigorously policing arrangements which allocated so many officers to Greenham Common when there were fewer officers available in the urban centres of the area. For example, at 10.00 am there were 55 police constables available in the division which covers Slough, 38 in the division which covers Reading and 37 in the division which covers Newbury. Part of the local political background is that Thames Valley has the lowest police/population ratio in the country (1:573). I plan to make known in the next few days that I will increase their establishment in 1983-4 by 43 posts, which will be the largest increase for any force outside London but that will not remove the local sensitivities.

If security is greatly tightened by more police officers at Greenham Common I am afraid that it will lead to more publicity for the protesters when they do breach it and it may also turn their attention to other bases such as Molesworth in Cambridgeshire and Upper Heyford, also in Thames Valley. The latter has already been the scene of considerable protest. Since the protesters have the benefits of mobility and surprise it would be wrong to assume that if they seemed to have left Greenham Common, the police effort could safely be scaled down.

Upper Heyford is, perhaps, an even more worrying problem than Greenham Common because the basic perimeter defences are non-existent in places. It simply cannot be protected. I am sure that urgent attention should be given to installing effective fencing before the threatened blockade of Upper Heyford from 31 May to 3 June.

The best way forward now might be for Home Office and Ministry of Defence officials to review together very urgently the physical defences of Greenham Common and Upper Heyford and the policing arrangements, inside and out. I am instructing my officials to get in touch with officials in the Ministry of Defence immediately. It seems desirable for them to report on any measures that should be taken before Easter by the end of next week.

I am copying this minute to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence, the Secretary of State for Scotland, the Attorney General and Sir Robert Armstrong.

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9 March 1983

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*From the Private Secretary*

14 March 1983

Policing of demonstrations at military bases

B/P

The Prime Minister has seen the Home Secretary's minute of 9 March on the above subject. She looks forward to a further account of measures which might be taken before Easter to improve the defences of Greenham Common and Upper Heyford and the policing arrangements.

I am copying this letter to Richard Mottram (Ministry of Defence), Brian Fall (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Muir Russell (Scottish Office), Henry Steel (Law Officers' Department) and Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

A. J. COLES

Tony Rawsthorne, Esq.,  
Home Office.

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