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28 July 1986

Dear Secretary of State,

FORCE LEVELS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Many thanks for your letter of 18th July about a number of aspects of military force levels in Northern Ireland.

Overall Force Level

Let me say at the outset that I fully appreciate the pressures under which the RUC have been operating and that the Army will continue to stand ready to provide any support that they need. Nevertheless, as I indicated when we decided to send the second reinforcement battalion, I am very anxious to avoid being drawn into an open-ended commitment and there seems to be considerable risk that this is now beginning to happen.

The Rt Hon Tom King MP



The first reinforcement battalion was sent to meet the increased operational commitments caused by the effects of the intensification of the PIRA campaign just before Christmas and, in particular, of a series of spectacularly successful attacks on police stations. The second battalion was intended to provide additional relief in the face of the need for the Army to provide continuing close protection for a very large number of RUC stations throughout the Province and to restore a margin of reserve for the "marching season".

These objectives have largely been achieved. We are past the peak of the marching season although we have still to face the first anniversary of the Hillborough agreement. What we have to ask ourselves now is whether there is any underlying reason for maintaining a force level which is 25% higher than last year. Frankly, our conclusion is that the overall security position now is not significantly worse than a year ago and we should therefore make arrangements to withdraw the additional battalions as soon as possible; bearing in mind that we retain the ability to provide reinforcements very rapidly should the need arise.

The Security Outlook

Although PIRA has been active throughout the year, their level of operations has not been significantly different from



last. After their attacks on RUC stations at the turn of the year there has been something of a lull in their attacks on Security Force bases. There has been only one major attack in recent months (Cloughmills) and the last mortar attack on an SF base (Kilkeel) was in May. Although INLA remain a latent and unpredictable threat, and may have partially recovered from recent problems, the threat from this quarter is no worse now than at several periods in recent years. Overall there have been 85 attacks on the SF since the beginning of the year, compared with 103 in the same period in 1985. There is no room for complacency and the picture can change quickly if the terrorists have a spectacular success but, as the detailed threat assessment attached to your minute indicates, there is no reason to foresee a fundamental change in the threat from either PIRA or INLA for some time to come. Equally, while serious trouble from the Unionists remains a possibility, the RUC have coped admirably with this year's marches and, apart from the forthcoming anniversary of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, there appears to be no reason to fear major disorder in the immediate future.

Against this background, I believe that we must take positive steps to reduce the level of military support to the police now that the end of the marching season reduces the immediate pressures on the RUC. While some police stations will clearly continue to rely on military protection for some time at



least, we cannot continue indefinitely to provide a military presence at 116 out of 159 stations in the Province. As I pointed out in February, this is a wasteful and restrictive use of military manpower and in many areas the task could be carried out by the RUC. I understand your reluctance to expand the RUC, but if there is a long term need for extra manpower - as your letter implies - this must be the correct way to supply it. It is certainly not cost-effective to use the Army as an alternative, quite apart from the effect that it has on the Army's ability to fulfil its other commitments.

I accept that it would be prudent to maintain the present force level until we have safely negotiated the anniversary of the Anglo-Irish agreement. But I consider that we must act now to restore our reserve (11 out of the Army's total of 40 infantry battalions are now committed to emergency tours) and that we should therefore set a firm timetable for withdrawing the two battalions during what is normally the relatively quiet winter period.

I agree therefore that both the current reinforcement battalions should be replaced at the end of their four month tours. But I would like to withdraw the first at the beginning of December so that the soldiers can be home for Christmas and not to replace the other when its tour ends in February 1987. I



hope you will agree that, given the security outlook, it would be sensible to plan accordingly.

Prison Guard Force (PGF)

I am grateful for the consideration that you have given to reducing the Army's commitments to the PGF. Although this is not the biggest problem so far as static commitments are concerned, it does impose a particularly awkward burden on BAOR. I note that you continue to see deterrent value in the presence of armed guards and I would not wish to dispute that judgement. Nevertheless, I do not see that this sort of static commitment need be undertaken by the Army; it would be more appropriate for it to be done by the RUC who are, of course, armed.

The construction of a new perimeter fence will, I am sure, play a key role in allowing a reduction in the military commitment. I hope, therefore, that you will be able to find a Northern Ireland contractor, or failing that, one from Great Britain to undertake this as soon possible. If this does not prove possible, I would be prepared to consider whether the Army might undertake this task, despite the very severe strain on RE resources, if it would enable us to reduce the PGF commitment quickly. But it would depend on exactly what would be involved.



Other Royal Engineer Assistance

I note that you intend to write to me again with further details of the Royal Engineer assistance which you are seeking. But I think I should make it clear now that I will find this very difficult as these resources are strictly limited and already severely stretched worldwide. I am glad that we have been able to meet the immediate crisis caused by the series of destructive attacks on RUC stations and we remain ready to provide extra assistance if similar emergencies arise.

Only three contractors have been murdered this year (north and south of the border) and the Army had noticed a marked improvement in the position by the beginning of June with all its outstanding contracts being let or re-tendered. The murder of Mr McKeever on 16th June caused a minor setback, although even this was not as significant as might have been expected. Nevertheless, if you consider that there is likely to be a continuing problem within Northern Ireland, I fully understand your need to find an alternative way of maintaining the police building programme. But I do not think it would be right to use the Army as a substitute for civilian contractors generally, even if it were possible which, frankly, it is not.



Conclusions

In order to meet urgent requirements in support of the police, the Army has for the last eight months provided both infantry reinforcements and extra engineers. The immediate objectives have now largely been met and we should restore the previous force levels as soon as possible and not seek to use the Army as a source of manpower to meet other problems which require proper long term solutions. Not only would this lead to an apparent setback for our policy of steadily shifting the burden from the Army to the RUC, but also it reduces the Army's ability to respond to genuine emergencies both within the Province and worldwide.

I am sure that we must get back to the 1985 force levels before the 1987 marching season begins and I hope, therefore, you will accept that we should withdraw the extra battalions once we are past the anniversary of the Anglo-Irish agreement according to the timetable outlined in paragraph 8 above. I would, of course, be prepared to reconsider this should there be any significant change in the threat.

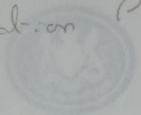
I am sending copies of this letter to the Prime Minister, and to Geoffrey Howe, Douglas Hurd and Sir Robert Armstrong.

You answered

[Signature]
 L George Younger

(Approved by the Secretary of State and signed in his absence.)

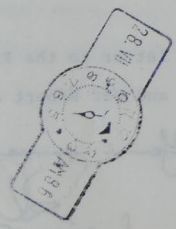
IRELAND: Situation Pt. 2 (



Conclusions

In order to meet urgent requirements in support of the policy, the Army has for the last eight months provided both infantry reinforcements and extra engineers. The immediate objectives have not largely been met and we should restore the previous force levels as soon as possible and not aim to use the Army as a source of manpower to meet other problems which require proper long term solutions. Not only would this lead to an apparent setback for our policy of steadily reducing the burden from the Army to the RUC, but also it reduces the Army's ability to respond to genuine emergencies both within the Province and outside.

I am sure that we must get back to the 1985 force levels before the 1987 wedding season begins and I hope, therefore, you will accept that we should withdraw the extra battalions once we are past the anniversary of the Anglo-Irish agreement according to the timetable outlined in paragraph 4 above. I would, of course, be pleased to reconsider this should there be any significant change in the threat.



I am sending copies of this to the Prime Minister, and to Gailley here, Douglas and the Secretary.

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SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND

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Delphu Jerehy's
reply
CBB 157A
18 July 1986*

The Rt Hon George Younger MP
Secretary of State for Defence
Ministry of Defence
Main Building
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SW1A 2HR

Dear Secretary of State

FORCE LEVELS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

We agreed earlier in the year that force levels in Northern Ireland should be reviewed during the summer with a view to reaching a decision about the timescale within which one or both of the two reinforcement battalions currently in the Province could be withdrawn. This letter also deals with the question of the Prison Guard Force, on which you wrote to me on 4 July.

I recently commissioned a threat assessment dealing with the terrorist threat, the risk of serious public order problems over the next few months, and the impact which the two reinforcement battalions have had. A copy of this assessment is in the attached folder. The key findings are:

- a) PIRA has maintained a high level of activity this year against a wide variety of targets, using a range of sophisticated techniques and tactics. They have the personnel, the equipment and the resolve to maintain this level of operations. Their continuing campaign of attacking security force bases and intimidating building contractors has been reinforced recently and is proving very hard to combat.
- b) INLA has recently regrouped and reorganised and has received a resupply of weapons and explosives. It appears more cohesive and determined than for some time and poses a vicious and unpredictable threat.

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- c) The Anglo-Irish Agreement gives loyalist extremists a clear focus for a campaign of opposition in association with the unionist political campaign. Their efforts to obtain weapons and explosives have met with some success, and loyalist terrorist attacks on Republican targets on both sides of the border have been discussed (and we have recently seen examples in Northern Ireland).
- d) There remains a significant threat of large-scale and repeated public disorder associated with loyalist demonstrations throughout the Summer: PIRA will have no compunction about raising tension by, for example, a "spectacular" terrorist attack.

In the light of this, the need for military support remains as compelling as ever. Police stations still depend for their security on an enveloping military presence; while the police themselves handle public order problems, military units must on occasion be held in readiness to give support if necessary; and the diversion of police resources to deal with public order inevitably leads to requests for more military support in the pure anti-terrorist field. The Chief Constable's judgement, which both I and the GOC endorse, is that this intensity of military operations must be maintained at least in the short to medium term.

Political factors support this operational assessment. The withdrawal of troops would be claimed by loyalists as proof that they had been brought in solely to counter loyalist opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. They would argue that we are prepared to deploy extra resources against them but not against Republican terrorists. I have therefore concluded that it is essential to retain two additional reinforcement battalions in Northern Ireland until at least January 1987. It remains my hope that it may then be possible to withdraw one of them, and we will continue to pursue options for reducing static commitments which might, we hope, make this possible.

I recognise the argument that the demands on the armed forces should be reduced, at least in part, by an increase in RUC establishment. I shall be discussing this with the Chief Constable and the GOC before long, and certainly I do not set my face against it in principle. But policemen and soldiers are not inter-changeable, and using the former on tasks which are not exclusively theirs would not be a cost-effective use of resources. I shall naturally be keeping the public order situation under review (some, at least, of our worst forebodings have not yet come to pass): but if the present situation looks like continuing for a lengthy period, we may need to take a critical look at those specific tasks which police officers are well qualified to undertake.

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Reducing Static Military Commitments

Since I fully appreciate the strain which your support for our policies in Northern Ireland places on the army, I have been anxious to see what can be done to reduce the number of static military commitments. Some minor steps in this direction have been taken, but the most significant load is the provision of the Prison Guard Force (PGF) at HM Prisons Maze and Belfast. I have therefore studied very carefully the report of the official working party on this problem, and Nick Scott has had a full briefing from HQNI.

There is an argument that the current advice about the rules of engagement for the PGF means that it is pointless to have an armed guard force, but I do not accept this. We must prevent the escape of hardened and experienced terrorists and we must accept that escape or rescue attempts are likely to be meticulously planned and ruthlessly executed. The presence of an armed guard force certainly constitutes a real deterrent in the face of the risk in both prisons of escape attempts involving firearms or explosives in circumstances which would justify the PGF in opening fire. In this context I do not believe unarmed Prison Officers to be an answer.

The GOC has explained clearly that if we can reduce the military commitment to about platoon level, he could absorb this within his present resources. I believe that there is scope for movement in this direction. The key to such a reduction would be the construction of a perimeter fence, on the lines of the one at HMP Maghaberry, and I have commissioned an urgent feasibility study into the design and siting of such a fence, technical aids, the acquisition of land, and the likely costs.

The main problem will almost certainly be the difficulty of getting the job done. I referred earlier to the recent reinforcement of PIRA's campaign of intimidation. We have so far had only limited success in countering this since we cannot compel people to work, or firms or consortia to bid. I believe that it is most unlikely in present circumstances that we will get anyone to tender for the high-profile contract of building a perimeter fence around HMP Maze. I wonder whether in these circumstances you would be prepared to consider allocating Royal Engineer resources to take on this task. I know that these resources are thinly stretched worldwide, but if you felt able to agree, the task could be completed quickly, securely and with certainty, thus enabling us to resolve the problems which the provision of the PGF undoubtedly causes for BAOR.

I had intended in any event to write to you soon about RE assistance with the police building programme. The Engineers have done a marvellous job for which I, the Chief Constable and the Police Authority are profoundly grateful. We do however now have a list of important building works for which civilian contractors have not bid, or are most unlikely to bid. We are

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scrutinising this rigorously to identify whether the tasks really are essential and whether there are alternative ways of proceeding, but it is possible that there will be some residual works for which I may have to ask for further RE resources. The alternative is for the RUC to be forced out of some of the most sensitive areas, which in both political and security terms would be a disaster.

Conclusion

I will write to you again about this once we have completed our study of the Police Authority's bid; I would hope by then too to have at least the preliminary results of the feasibility study on the proposed perimeter fence at HMP Maze. Meanwhile I should be grateful if you would consider positively my proposal that two additional reinforcement battalions should continue to be deployed in Northern Ireland until at least January 1987: perhaps we could review the situation again in October. It would also be helpful to have your provisional reaction to the suggestion that RE resources might be used to build a perimeter fence at HMP Maze.

I appreciate the enormous difficulties which my requests are bound to create for you, but the situation is critically poised. The RUC is standing up very well to the pressure placed on it, but its continued performance as it faces both sophisticated and determined terrorist attack, and loyalist obstruction and violence, is crucially dependent on the support of the armed forces.

I am sending copies of this letter, without the Assessment, to the Prime Minister, Geoffrey Howe, Douglas Hurd and Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours sincerely
J. Daniels

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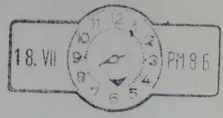
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of State and signed in his
absence)

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IRELAND: Situation PL-21

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Approved by the Secretary
of State and signed in his
presence

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