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NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
WHITEHALL
LONDON SW1A 2AZ

SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND

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We'd use the same arguments - the same if they were...
addressed to...
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Handwritten signature: Rie Munnis

11th August 1986

Rt Hon George Younger MP
Secretary of State for Defence
Main Building
Whitehall
London SW1

Handwritten initials: JW

Handwritten: 1/8.

Dear Secretary of State,
FORCE LEVELS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Thank you for your letter of 28 July. I have also seen the letter from the Prime Minister's Private Secretary of 29 July. I cannot for the moment resolve all the points at issue, but I think I should give you and our colleagues my immediate reactions and, in particular, warn you that I think it may be over optimistic to plan on the early withdrawal of the two additional roulement Battalions.

The threat assessment which I sent you with my earlier letter had the full support of all my professional advisers who live with the problems on the ground - including the GOC as well as the Chief Constable and my Director and Coordinator of Intelligence - and it should not be lightly discounted. The additional roulement battalions have done a fine job; but insofar as the objectives for which they were sent here have been "largely achieved" this is because of the intensive efforts of those battalions and the other security forces. The problems are being contained; but they have not been eliminated. The fact is that we are faced with a very high level of PIRA activity, linked with the Anglo-Irish Agreement and concentrated particularly in the border areas. To deal with this we need a long-haul strategy. The benefits in cross-border security cooperation we are seeking through the Anglo-Irish Agreement have had no appreciable impact so far, nor is it realistic to suppose that they will do so for some time to come. Meanwhile, a high level of military support for the RUC is essential.

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During the past 2 weeks we have had three policemen murdered at midday in the town centre of Newry (which has led to the reintroduction of military patrols in the town); a part-time UDR man has been killed in the Protestant area of Belfast; a British soldier has been shot and wounded at a permanent vehicle checkpoint near the border at Londonderry; and another civilian contractor has been shot dead. I would suggest that these incidents demonstrate that no-one here is crying wolf. As we always emphasise to visitors to Northern Ireland, crude security statistics are a misleading indicator of the situation (although in fact the casualty figures are slightly higher than they were this time last year). In recent months, they have not fully reflected the degree of effort and sophisticated expertise which the terrorists have been putting into their campaign. The proportion of attacks on security forces personnel which are successful is worryingly high; but what is even more significant is the frequency with which serious attacks are being thwarted by good work on the part of the security forces, or even at times by sheer good fortune. I attach a short annex listing some of these instances in the last few months: if even a few of these explosive devices had not been found and defused in time the casualty figures would look very different.

Further more, the level of terrorist activity as such cannot sensibly be looked at in isolation, but has to be seen in combination with the marked increase in public order problems which has followed the signature of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Of course these are primarily a matter for the police; but they contribute directly to the overall strain on the security forces which is my central concern.

As I indicated earlier, I have put urgent work in hand, in consultation with the RUC and HQNI, on a study of the interaction between police and army manpower and tasks. I shall be in touch with you again as soon as we have the results of this; and I shall be extremely interested to learn the CGS's impressions after his forthcoming visit to Northern Ireland on this and on the general situation. But even if the study were to show that some tasks now being performed by soldiers could be undertaken by police it would take time to recruit and train the necessary policemen.

I fully appreciate your concern about open-ended commitments. It is in my interest as much as yours to work towards a situation in which military force levels can be reduced; but that cannot be done at the expense of safety. I fear that Northern Ireland is itself an open-ended commitment. We must hope that when the marching season is over and the anniversary of the Anglo-Irish Agreement is past there will be some relaxation of the current pressures on the public order front; but at present I see no reason to suppose that there will be an early reduction in the PIRA campaign of violence. In these circumstances I am bound to say that I believe it would be unwise to assume that both the additional roulement battalions can be safely withdrawn in the timescale you indicate.

At this stage I have no further comment of substance to make on the Prison Guard Force at HMP Maze. A feasibility study on the security fence is in progress and we have made arrangements for the senior

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Royal Engineer officer in the Province to see for himself what would be involved. I shall be in touch as soon as we have some hard information to inform our decisions.

As to the elements of the police building programme, your remark that "only three contractors" had been murdered this year has unfortunately already been overtaken by events and, in any case, overlooks the very wide impact that even a single killing can have in intimidating both contractors and their workforce. It is a tribute to the people of the Province that PIRA have had to mount such a sustained campaign of murder to discourage any drift back to work; but recent publicity will have shown you how effective the terrorist campaign can be, and the latest PIRA death threat has made a still further impact. Over the next five years the police building programme calls for 16 major new projects, at a cost of over £41M, as well as replacing temporary and unprotected buildings at over 100 sites. My request for RE assistance on four of these sites where the operational need is most pressing should be seen against the scale of the problems we face. I am, however, giving further thought to the difficulties and will be writing separately about this.

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

Yours Sincerely
N. Howard
(Private Secretary)

for

TK

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

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LIST OF SIGNIFICANT INCIDENTS SINCE 1 MAY IN WHICH MEMBERS OF THE SECURITY FORCES NARROWLY ESCAPED DEATH OR SERIOUS INJURY

- 2 May A proxy car bomb comprising 150 lbs of home-made explosives (HME) left outside the permanent vehicle checkpoint in CLADY, Co Tyrone exploded causing extensive damage to the checkpoint and surrounding buildings. There were no casualties.
- 28 May Three mortar rounds were fired at a military observation post (OP) at Drummuckavall near CROSSMAGLEN in South Armagh. All three landed accurately on the target but fortunately none exploded. They were dealt with by an ATO.
- 31 May Two off-duty soldiers had a narrow escape after attending a discotheque when a small bomb attached to the underside of their car exploded as one of them drove the vehicle away from his parking place in Mark Street, PORTRUSH. The rear of the car was extensively damaged but the soldiers escaped injury.
- 17 June During the clearance operation mounted by the security forces following the discovery of the body of a man on 16 June on the border at Mullaghduff Bridge near CULLYHANNA in South Armagh a booby trap bomb comprising an estimated 150 lb of HME was located. It was neutralised by an ATO.
- 19 June The RUC received a report of a suspicious device behind a wall of the golf club at Mound Road roundabout, Narrow Water near WARRENPOINT in Co Down. On investigation a remotely/radio controlled improvised explosive device (RCIED) was discovered. It comprised approximately 1000 lbs of HME. After a cautious clearance operation it was neutralised by an ATO on 22 June.
- 4 July An ATO neutralised a command wire improvised explosive device (CWIED) comprising 5 beer kegs containing a total of almost 450 lbs of HME which had been placed in a manhole on the DUNGANNON/COALISLAND road in Co Tyrone. The device had been discovered on 3 July by British Telecom engineers working in the area.
- 5 July A UDR foot patrol discovered a command wire leading to a hijacked VW van which had been left on the COOKSTOWN/POMEROY road in Co Tyrone. The area was cordoned and an ATO

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- tasked who dealt with a CWIED of 450 lbs of HME contained in the van.
- 10 July An ATO neutralised a booby trap bomb attached to the underside of a car at the junction of Fountain Street/Cunningham Way in ANTRIM. It had been discovered by the owner of the vehicle - a full time member of the RUC (Reserve).
- 12 July A number of men kidnapped a member of the TA as he was walking along the Crumlin Road in NORTH BELFAST. He was taken to an address in the Ardoyne area of Belfast where his captors then discovered his connection with the Army. He was interrogated about his involvement with the security forces and severely beaten. Acting on information received the police surrounded the house in which he was held, entered the premises and freed him. Three people were arrested in a nearby property in connection with this incident. All were charged with kidnapping and other related offences.
- 16 July A 4-man Army foot patrol approached a car parked near DRUMMUCKAVALL OP in South Armagh. As they did so they noticed wires protruding from it and the car then exploded. Two soldiers were not seriously injured. A man was seen running away and several shots were fired at him but no hits were reported.
- 18 July A part-time members of 6 UDR miraculously escaped with just minor injuries after a bomb detonated under his van as he was driving along a road near CASTLEDERG in Co Tyrone.
- 19 July The INLA planted a small bomb in the Crown Bar, North Street, NEWRY. This bar is known to be frequented by members of the security forces. The owner of the premises discovered the device and threw it out into the street. The ATO was tasked and dealt with it.
- 21 July As a result of a carefully planned operation, lasting several weeks, against terrorist activity, in the Andersonstown area of WEST BELFAST the security forces searched premises at 10A Dunmisk Park. They found almost 300 lbs of HME and a variety of other bomb making components in the garage. These included two sawn-down CO₂ gas cylinders believed to be intended for use as anti-personnel devices against the security forces. Seven people were arrested in connection

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with this find. Five of them were subsequently charged with explosives offences.

25 July

A 200 lb HME proxy van bomb parked outside RUC DUNGIVEN in Co Londonderry was neutralised by an ATO.

26 July

An ATO dealt with a 220 lb HME proxy car bomb stopped at the entrance gate to Port George Security Force Base in LONDONDERRY.

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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

19 August 1986

The Prime Minister has seen your Secretary of State's minute of 11 August about force levels in Northern Ireland. She has noted that the issues involved remain under consideration but has commented that the same arguments would be used even if there were four additional battalions rather than two. In the Prime Minister's view too many soldiers on the ground often means too many targets for the terrorists.

I am sending copying this letter to Colin Budd (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Stephen Boys Smith (Home Office), John Howe (Ministry of Defence) and Michael Stark (Cabinet Office).

(Timothy Flesher)

Jim Daniell, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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MINISTRY OF DEFENCE WHITEHALL LONDON SW1A 2HB

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

MO 19/3E

10 September 1986

Dear Tom,

COP
M/A.

FORCE LEVELS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Many thanks for your further letter of 11th August ^{at this} about force levels.

I should first of all make clear that it was not my intention in my earlier letter to question the detailed threat assessment which you provided. On the contrary, I believe that the threat assessment supports the view that, although PIRA activity continues to be high, the level of violence and of the threat have returned to very much the same level as they were in 1985 before the successful series of attacks at the turn of this year. In saying this, I am very conscious that something could happen tomorrow to change the picture significantly for the worse (as, regrettably, happened immediately after my last letter in the case of contractor intimidation). But this is an ever-present danger in Northern

The Rt Hon Tom King MP

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Ireland. Similarly, there is, unfortunately, nothing novel about the type of incidents described in your third paragraph and supporting Annex, or about the fact that casualties could have been much worse if particular devices had not been defused.

In short, it does seem to me that the two battalions have largely achieved the objectives for which they were sent to the Province and, while there will always be some risk that the problems will increase if they are withdrawn, I am most reluctant to leave them in Northern Ireland without any specific target date for withdrawal because of the pressures this imposes on the Army as a whole. In my last letter I drew attention to the need to restore the level of our reserve, but the pressures on the soldiers themselves are at least as important. The average interval between unaccompanied tours for UKLF infantry battalions is now down to less than a year compared with a minimum target of two years and an actual level of 19 months a year ago. Each battalion withdrawn would raise this average by some 2½ months. At the same time I would not wish to see the 'nights out of bed ratio' again rise to unacceptable levels for the remaining troops as a result of any withdrawals. We must also do our utmost to get away from the planning problems caused by reviewing the future of the additional battalions every few months. Against this background, I believe we need to consider the underlying requirement for Army manpower in Northern Ireland.



Now that the threat has returned to about the same level as last year, our objective should also be to return to the same force level as soon as possible. But the Army in Northern Ireland is now having to provide a significantly higher level of support to the RUC than at the beginning of 1985, a trend which was beginning to develop even before the pre-Christmas PIRA attacks. As I have indicated previously, we believe that a number of the Army's current commitments - notably the close protection of such a large number of RUC stations - represent an inappropriate use of Army manpower. The essential first step is therefore the study you have initiated into the relationship between police and Army tasks which should identify the true police and Army force levels required. It may well be that one of the reasons why the Army has had to take on extra commitments is a shortage of police manpower, but if this is the case I believe that the underlying problem must be met by an expansion of the RUC rather than by an increase in Army force levels.

Until we know the results of the manpower study we cannot reach final decisions on the force level for next year but in my view the pressures on the Army are such that we must withdraw at least one battalion as soon as possible. I recognise that it takes time to recruit and train extra policemen, which is why I first drew attention to the possibility of a police manpower problem in my letter of 24th February. I would, if necessary, be prepared to leave the second additional battalion in place for the whole of



1987 but only to provide the time for police strength to be increased. It is essential that the study is completed as soon as possible so that we develop a clear view of police and Army manpower needs and can plan accordingly. To slip from one extension to another, is disruptive for the Army and can lead to an open-ended commitment.

The exact timing of the withdrawal of the first battalion is a matter of fine judgement. To be home by Christmas, which has obvious presentational attractions, it would need to begin its withdrawal by 15th December, but this would still mean that the existing force level could be maintained for a month after the anniversary of the Anglo-Irish agreement and until the point when in most previous years we have seen something of a lull in violence over the holiday period. If there is a lull, it might be the best point to disengage and it would also give us more of an opportunity to gauge the impact of withdrawing the first battalion before the onset of the next marching season and before reaching a final decision about the second battalion. On the other hand, there are some advantages in retaining the battalion until the end of its normal tour in January, principally to ease the burdens on the troops remaining in Northern Ireland over the Christmas period and as a precaution against an upsurge in terrorist attacks on last year's pattern. On balance, I have concluded that we should leave the battalion in place over Christmas, but not replace it at the end of its tour.



Finally, I have noted that you may still be seeking further Royal Engineer assistance. The position on intimidation has undoubtedly taken a turn for the worse since my last letter as a result of the murders of Messrs Kyle and Bell and the associated repetition and extension of PIRA threats although, so far, the Army's problems have been mainly related to the supply of materials. I have already said that because of the importance which we attach to reducing the military commitment to the Maze Prison Guard Force we would be prepared to consider whether it would be possible for the Royal Engineers to undertake the construction of the Maze perimeter fence if this was the only way in which the Army's commitment could be reduced quickly. I was therefore very disappointed to hear that at the latest Security Coordination Meeting the Northern Ireland Office appeared to be going back on the indication in your letter of 18th July that you could accept a reduction to about platoon level following the conclusion of the Prison Guard Force Review that a number of tasks need not continue to be carried out by soldiers. More generally, we will, of course, always do what we can to help in extremis, but I must repeat my warning that RE resources are limited and already stretched world-wide and I hope, therefore, you will exhaust all other options first.

I should be grateful to know that you and colleagues are content to proceed with planning for the withdrawal of the two reinforcement battalions on the basis outlined above. I am

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

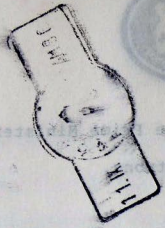
Yours
wv,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "George".

George Younger

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...sending copies of this letter to the ...
...Douglas Hurd and to Sir Robert ...

Handwritten scribbles or initials.

George Younger
George Younger

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10 DOWNING STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

29 July 1986

FORCE LEVELS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Prime Minister has seen the Northern Ireland Secretary's letter of 18 July to the Defence Secretary and the Defence Secretary's reply of 28 July about future force levels in Northern Ireland.

The Prime Minister hopes that the matter of how long to keep the two reinforcement battalions in Northern Ireland can be settled in discussion between the Northern Ireland Secretary and the Defence Secretary. She herself tends to the view that if their service in Northern Ireland is extended for too long, it will look like becoming an open-ended commitment.

I am copying this letter to the Private Secretaries to the Defence Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Home Secretary and Sir Robert Armstrong.

(C. D. POWELL)

Jim Daniell, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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