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MO 19/3L

2 October 1986

*Amint NI Security  
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3/K.*

*Dear Tom,*

NORTHERN IRELAND FORCE LEVELS AND ADDITIONAL RE ASSISTANCE

Thank you for your letter of 15th September in which you requested additional Royal Engineer assistance in Northern Ireland. I have since also received your letter of 23rd September on force levels in the Province. As both letters focus essentially on the question of the deployment of extra troops to the Province I will deal with them together.

I was most grateful for your warm words of appreciation of the efforts which have been made by the Royal Engineers in support of the police over the last 10 months. I have passed on your high praise to the Engineer-in-Chief.

I do not wish to prolong our exchanges over the overall threat and the level of violence in the Province today compared

The Rt Hon Tom King MP

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with the last year or so. As I mentioned in my letter of 10th September, we have never sought to question the detailed threat assessments which have been made and there undoubtedly continues to be a high level of PIRA activity which has led to surges of violence at different times throughout the last 18 months or so, though it is difficult to demonstrate conclusively that the underlying level of violence is significantly different now from what it was 12 or even 18 months ago.

My concern is that we should not be distracted by an over-emphasis on the detailed assessment of the threat from addressing the fundamental issues. These are whether, given the severe 'overstretch' with which the infantry and Royal Engineers in particular are faced, we should:

- a. Add indefinitely to that overstretch by continuing to employ soldiers on jobs which in our view are best handled by the police; and
- b. Exacerbate Royal Engineer overstretch and turbulence by using Sappers to carry out civil construction tasks on behalf of the RUC without positively seeking other solutions.

On the first point, the Army believes that many of the commitments which they have been asked to undertake by the RUC



do not lead to the most effective use of Army manpower. The expansion of the RUC to enable them to take back these essentially protective tasks, perhaps by recruiting manpower for a specific and limited role, would not only release Army manpower for more active anti-terrorist operations to which their skills are more appropriate, but also, and more importantly, would lead to a reduction in infantry force levels in the Province. As your letter of 25th September indicates, there is likely to be resistance to this from the RUC for reasons which I can understand. But unless there are some positive developments in this area to enable the police to look after their own protection it is difficult to see how the Army's commitment can be contained, let alone reduced.

We must focus now on a proper plan for the future withdrawal of the 2 reinforcement battalions on the lines outlined in my letter of 10th September. The current arrangements are disruptive for Army planning and, as the Prime Minister has commented, can lead to an open-ended commitment. It remains my intention, therefore, to withdraw one infantry battalion at the end of its tour after Christmas and, if you consider it necessary, to leave the second additional battalion in the Province for the whole of 1987 in order to allow you time to find solutions to the RUC's manpower problems.



As for Royal Engineer assistance, the provision of 2 consecutive additional squadrons covering an 8 month period from February 1987 would cause me some difficulty. I am prepared to deploy one squadron as soon as possible after February 1987 for a period of 4 months which should permit the re-building of 2 RUC stations. But I hope that for the period after June 1987, an alternative solution can be found by positive moves to adopt one or more of the options referred to in your letter of 15th September. This will allow your Department almost 9 months in which to make other arrangements employing civil labour. I am anxious to avoid the request for Royal Engineer support on essentially civil tasks taking on the appearance of yet another open-ended commitment.

Finally, on the question of the security fence at the Maze Prison, as you know the Army has been pressing for a reduction in this static task for some time as we do not regard it as a proper role for soldiers. I am disappointed therefore if there has been a misunderstanding over the extent to which you might be able to achieve reductions in military posts there. But, I must make it plain that unless the Prison Guard Force can be radically reduced in size to around 30 men, there cannot be any possibility of the Army finding the additional Royal Engineer manpower to re-build the fence.



The central issue continues to be that of how we can reduce the pressures on the infantry and Royal Engineers by, in-so-far as it is sensible to do so, bringing down force levels in the Province to a more sustainable level. I have suggested how this should be done and I hope that you can agree to my proposals. We shall, of course, always be prepared to help in an emergency with both infantry (the Spearhead battalion can be deployed within 72 hours) and Royal Engineers. But we must resist commitments becoming open-ended.

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

Yours sincerely,  
George

George Younger

Situation : IRELAND A 21.





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Northern Ireland Office  
Stormont Castle  
Belfast BT4 3ST

Rt Hon George Younger MP  
Secretary of State for Defence  
Ministry of Defence  
Whitehall  
LONDON  
SW1A 2HB

*Answer Mr King's  
definitive reply  
CAD*

23 September 1986

*Dear George,*

FORCE LEVELS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

*at this*

Thank you for your letter of 10 September. For the reasons given below my response must still remain an interim one, although I shall be coming back to you in definitive terms as soon as I can next month.

Your letter seems to turn on two assumptions:

- a. that today's threat and level of violence have returned to the levels of 1985, before the upsurge at the end of that year; and
- b. that soldiers can be replaced by policemen, and that we are committed to doing so.

I am afraid that I have to take issue with you on both grounds. We do not believe here that the level of threat and violence has subsided as you suggest. Those responsible for the earlier threat assessment believe that the current threat is substantially higher than this time a year ago and certainly comparable to the high levels of activity in December and January. Some PIRA tactics have changed, almost certainly, as intelligence has demonstrated, in response to the level of protection now given to RUC stations. The current emphasis is much more on proxy bombs than direct mortar

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attacks - a tactic which is more difficult to preempt. We can expect PIRA to keep changing its tactics in response to action by the security forces. Additionally, we face an increasing problem in Belfast - which has been relatively quiet for the past year, because of Security Force successes; and the recent upsurge in sectarian violence does not make the security force task any easier. As to the level of violence, we have already had nearly as many deaths as in the whole of 1985: in the comparable period of both years, injuries are up by 75%; shooting incidents by 50%; and attacks on RUC stations by more than 50%. It is very difficult to equate this situation on the ground with a view that we are now no worse off than we were last year.

As you recognise, I do not yet have the report of the study into the relationship between police and army tasks. I hope to have it by the end of this month, but I am advised that it is already clear that there is a fundamental divergence of view between the police and army as to their appropriate tasks, and that any agreed action could have only a peripheral effect on army manpower. This will present us both with a real problem, but I will come back to you as soon as I have discussed the report with the Chief Constable and GOC.

Finally, I am disappointed if there has been a misunderstanding about the Prison Guard Force. In my letter of 18 July I was not endorsing the GOC's position but rather making it clear that between the 140 or so men now committed, and the platoon sought by the GOC, there could be some scope for compromise.

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

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... a factor which is more difficult to measure. We can expect  
... to keep changing its tactics in response to action by the  
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of security force successes; and the recent upsurge in sectarian  
violence does not mean the security force task any easier. As to the  
level of violence, we have already had nearly as many deaths as in  
the whole of 1967. In the comparative period of both years, injuries  
are up by 100% shooting incidents by 20% and attacks on RUC stations  
by more than 50%. It is very difficult to gauge this situation on  
the ground with a view that we are now no worse off than we were  
last year.

As you recognise, I do not yet have the report of the study into the  
relationship between police and army tasks. I hope to have it by  
the end of this month, but I am advised that it is already clear  
that there is a fundamental divergence of view between the police  
and army as to their appropriate tasks, and that any agreed action  
could have only a peripheral effect on army manpower. This will  
present us with a real problem, but I will come back to you as  
soon as I have discussed the report with the Chief Constable and GOC.

Finally, I am disappointed if there has been a misunderstanding about  
the Union Command Report. In my letter of 28 July I was not endorsing  
the GOC's position but rather asking if clear lines between the 1st or  
2nd are now considered, and the phasing sought by the GOC, there could  
be some scope for compromise.

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

*[Handwritten signature]*



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still making in support of the police. There can be no doubt that their flexibility, capacity for hard work and ingenuity in procuring materials in the face of the Provisional IRA threats is an inspiration and a very significant boost to the morale of every policeman in the Province.

Turning now to further RE support for the above items in the RUC building programme, you will no doubt be aware that the Provisional IRA have not only re-emphasised recently their threat to building contractors engaged in work for the security forces but also widened it to cover those supplying items such as food, fuel and transport facilities - and have backed it with two further murders to add to the previous three. Against the background of fear and tension brought about by this most vicious PIRA threat yet (and by counter-threats from Loyalist paramilitary groups) we are striving both to maintain the programme of rebuilding and improving protection at police stations by the use of local civilian contractors and establish viable alternatives to these local contractors. In endeavouring to ease the current problems of getting work done we have been pursuing a number of options. Local RUC stations have been given delegated authority to have small maintenance work carried out quietly. The Police Authority have been doing their utmost to ease the situation and have tried, so far without success, to stimulate local interest in a NI consortium taking on work; a similar idea, under PSA auspices, has made little progress in GB. I understand that the Police Authority are in touch with a Hong Kong firm who had earlier expressed an interest in taking on work. NIO officials are investigating similar radical options.

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Royal Engineers it is estimated that it will require the deployment of two successive field squadrons for consecutive four months roulement tours. I believe this programme of work represents a necessary and essential use of RE resources whilst the direct PIRA threat remains and I seek your agreement that one additional roulement squadron be deployed to the Province at the beginning of February 1987 and another four months later. I might add that once some of the work requested has been completed it should reduce the number of soldiers required at Rosslea and reduce the commitment of helicopter flights into Carrickmore.

The task of building a security fence for HMP Maze, on the understanding that its construction secured the end of the military commitment to provide a roulement squadron/battery from BAOR for the Prison Guard Force, has been assessed as requiring Royal Engineer reinforcements of one field squadron with some additional specialists for six months after a minimum initial design and procurement stage of about six months. In terms of time and cost this option has significant advantages over the employment of civilian contractors to carry out the task which has been assessed as taking an overall time of three years (including the six months design stage) - always assuming that contractors could be found to tender for such a highly visible task.

I have authorised the design of the fence to proceed but I am afraid that I am not yet able to come to you with a firm request for Royal Engineers assistance, as agreement has not yet been reached on the

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The fact remains that if, in the short to medium term, we are effectively to counter the IRA tactic of attacking exposed police stations and then preventing repairs by means of intimidation, the support of the Royal Engineers is crucial. Not only is it the sole means of securing urgent reconstruction work; it is also the most visible demonstration of the Government's will to meet PIRA's challenge head on and defeat it, and of the Government's commitment to the security and morale of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Speaking to the Sappers on the ground I have been impressed to find how they appreciate the challenge and the importance of their task, and the satisfaction they derive from doing a vital, operational task in support of their colleagues in the RUC.

As I said in my previous letter, my request for additional Royal Engineer assistance is for those four stations mentioned above where the RUC must stand firm and where there is an urgent, operational need to provide blast and mortar-proof premises. In both political and security terms we simply cannot allow the RUC presence in those locations to be overthrown.

I understand that the lead time for preparing design plans and ordering supplies is such that it would not be possible for the work to be started by a squadron arriving at the beginning of November (when the present additional roulement squadron leaves), nor is there in any case likely to be a squadron available before 1 February 1987. Further I understand that if this work is taken on by the

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precise size and composition of the residual Guard Force that will be needed once a fence has been built in order to maintain what we assess as the requisite level of security. We are trying to resolve this problem urgently. Meanwhile you may wish to leave sufficient flexibility in the Royal Engineers Arms Plot for 1987 to keep open the option of using Royal Engineers to build the security fence if, as I hope, the subsequent composition of the Prison Guard Force is agreed, in order that reinforcement from BAOR may cease to be necessary.

To summarise, I shall be most grateful if you will see your way to providing two additional roulement field squadrons to serve successively in the Province from 1 February 1987 in order to carry out operationally essential work on the four police stations named above. I consider this task to be so important to maintaining the Government's security policy here - in the face of both the terrorist threat and criticism from opponents of the Anglo-Irish Agreement - that I should be happy to discuss my request with the Prime Minister and colleagues if you thought that necessary. I shall write again on the security fence at HMP Maze if and when the outstanding issue has been resolved satisfactorily.

I have now seen your letter of 10 September on force levels. I

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shall be replying separately on the main issue but think it important to press ahead with Engineer assistance now.

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

Yours Sincerely  
Edward  
(Private Secretary)

for TK

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

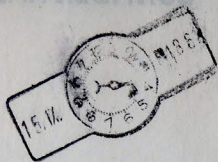
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IRELAND: Situation PE21.



shall be replied expeditiously on the main issue but there is  
important to press ahead with highest assistance now.  
I am copying this letter to the Prime Minister, Geoffrey Howe and  
Douglas Hurd and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours sincerely  
Robert  
(Prime Secretary)

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

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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

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*31<sup>st</sup>* October 1986

*Dear John,*

ADDITIONAL RE ASSISTANCE IN NORTHERN IRELAND *attap*

Your Secretary of State wrote to mine on *✓* 2 October about force levels in Northern Ireland, Royal Engineer assistance to the police building programme, and the Prison Guard Force (PGF).

The question of force levels is being pursued separately, but I am writing now to confirm the message passed to you at official level some days ago that Mr King is grateful for Mr Younger's offer of a single RE squadron for 1 roulement tour starting in early spring 1987, and wishes to accept it. He would of course have preferred more, and our problems are likely to increase with the murder a week ago of a member of staff of one of our key contractors; but he recognises Mr Younger's difficulties, and is in any case urgently exploring other avenues.

As to the PGF, my Secretary of State is sorry that we have so far been unable to reach a settlement convenient to both sides. He does however feel that the main problem is the protection of the Maze prison from armed external attack or armed internal breakout. This is primarily a military task, and though he accepts that it is not an ideal use of soldiers, it would be still more inappropriate, less effective and a much weaker deterrent were it to fall to police or prison officers. While my Secretary of State readily accepts that it is possible to reduce the Military Manpower Bill substantially from the present 130 or so, he sees no reasonable prospect of bringing the figure down to the 30 men which your Secretary of State has in mind.

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

*Yours sincerely  
Neil Ward*

N D Ward

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