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Text of statement made in the House of Commons by Mr. Paul Channon MP Minister of State for Northern Ireland, announcing the result of certain military operations throughout the "no-go" areas. Statements made by other members are also included.

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The Minister of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Paul Channon): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I will make a statement.

At four o'clock this morning the security forces in Northern Ireland moved in strength into a number of areas which have been used as bases for murder, intimidation and the destruction of property. Before these activities began, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State issued at 9.30 p.m. last night a general advice and warning to the population to assist the security forces and protect themselves by keeping off the streets.

The operations met with little resistance, and I am glad to be able to tell the House that known casualties were in all the circumstances extremely light. Two civilians were killed and two injured. These were people who, in spite of the warning issued, were present on the streets in the early hours of the morning.

It is a matter for great regret that there were any casualties at all, but it is a tribute both to the discipline and moderation of the troops and to the good sense of the population at large that these extensive operations were successfully carried out at so little cost.

As a result of these operations all barricades, Protestant and Catholic, have either been removed or are being urgently taken down.

The sole aim of the operations is to see that everyone in Northern Ireland enjoys the full protection of the law. Where such protection does not exist, law-abiding people are exposed to such savagery as we saw on "Blood Friday" in Belfast, and to brutal and indiscriminate murder, assault and intimidation. Our purpose is not to act against any section of the community but to protect all, and to restore as soon as possible the ordinary conditions of life.

Last night's military operation was by no means an end in itself. There can be no military solution to the complex problems of Northern Ireland; but political representatives cannot hope to discuss the future openly and without fear if the rule of law is defied by any section of the community. Even today, a bomb outrage at Claudy, in County Londonderry has claimed a further six lives, thus underlining yet again the urgent need to free the population from the oppression of terror.

The policy of Her Majesty's Government continues to rest, as it always has done, on two objectives first, the restoration of peace and the destruction of the capacity of the men of violence to terrorise the community; secondly, to engage in constructive discussion as to how the political, social and economic aspirations of the whole community can best be met.

Mr. Merlyn Rees: Is the Minister of State aware that, following the response of the IRA in the last ten days of killing or bombing and of the destruction of the centre of Derry, for example, there was an inevitability about this morning's military action? There was a calculated risk, and the House will be glad that the advance publicity and the strength of the response and the discipline of the troops have led to such a very small number of deaths.



Now that the occupation has taken place, what comes next? Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the IRA wanted a military response and that it is our responsibility to ensure that we do not, by our actions in the area, drive the Catholics as a whole into the arms of the IRA again? It is our job to ensure also that the political initiative that the hon. Gentleman talks about is not put at risk. Are steps being taken, not just to occupy, but to ensure that weapons and gelignite do not reach the IRA? Is attention being given to policing the area, because in the long run it is not the Army's role to police such areas?

Is the hon. Gentleman aware that hon. Members on both sides of the House expect action against all private armies and their weapons? Is he aware, for example, that I am informed that in today's Belfast Newsletter there is a photograph of four UVF members in training; all are armed and one with an Armalite rifle? Both sides in this dispute must be disarmed if there is to be peace. Is the hon. Gentleman aware that there is fear, which has been present for a number of weeks now during the truce, of sectarian murders and that it is vital that this be dealt with?

Finally, the hon. Gentleman has made clear what is certain and what we on this side of the House will support; namely, that there is no military solution in the long run to the problem of Northern Ireland. Is it not urgent now not only to talk about the political future but to use the mood of expectancy which has arisen in the last few days and for the Government to make proposals which will lead to elections in the North next year?

Mr. Channon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, as I am sure the House will be, for his remarks, and in particular for what he said about the discipline of the troops, which has been generally recognised as being magnificent.

I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the need to ensure that weapons and gelignite do not get into the wrong hands. I note what the hon. Gentleman says about this matter.

As to what the hon. Gentleman says about other illegal activities in the Province, my right hon. Friend has made it perfectly clear that he intends to prosecute with impartiality all illegal activities, from whatever source they may come, in so far as it is a matter for him to prosecute them. My right hon. Friend intends to pursue those who commit illegal acts, no matter from what section of the community they come.

I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the very serious and tragic wave of sectarian murders which have taken place during the past month or so. They come from both sections of the community. My right hon. Friend is ensuring that the police are pursuing this matter with the greatest possible urgency.

I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman also that, as I said in my statement, no military solution is possible to the complex problems of Northern Ireland. My right hon. Friend intends to pursue urgently the political talks which he has already been engaged in; he will pursue them further with the utmost urgency to try to find, if it is possible, a political framework in which all the people of Northern Ireland can find a peaceful future.

Captain Orr: Is my hon. Friend aware that I am sure that I speak for the vast majority of the people of Ulster when I say that we warmly congratulate the forces of the Crown upon the skill, precision and humanity with which they carried out the duties this morning? Will my hon. Friend give an undertaking that there will be no withdrawal



from the areas which have now been occupied by the Army until such time as arrangements are made for some kind of interim policing of the areas and until it is possible for peace-loving people in the areas to go about their business freely and openly and conduct their political activities in a democratic manner?

What has happened to the members of the IRA? We appreciate the necessity for a warning to be given to the population, but has my hon. Friend any idea whether the members of the IRA are across the border? If that be so, what steps are being taken to prevent their return to Northern Ireland and to prevent the kind of incident that happened at Claudy this afternoon? Is my hon. Friend aware that the sooner a decision is made about the political future for Ulster that now follows the better; the sooner the interregnum comes to an end the better it will be for everyone?

Mr. Channon: I am grateful to my hon. and gallant Friend for what he, too, has said about the troops. As to the undertaking for which he asks, I think he will agree that it is far too early for me yet - these events took place only about 12 hours ago - to give an undertaking of that kind, but I note what he says. Already, steps have been taken to start some form of police presence in these areas, and our aim is to restore them to normality in all senses of the word.

As for where the IRA have gone, even if I had full knowledge on that matter I am not sure that I should be wise to tell the House exactly what information I had, but, since he raises the matter, my hon. and gallant Friend can be assured that the Government of the Irish Republic are in no doubt about our views on this matter and have been well aware of them for a long time.

Mr. David Steel: Now that the operation has been successfully concluded, and since the Minister's statement reasserts that there can be no military solution to the problem of Northern Ireland, is it too much to hope that those in Ulster who describe themselves as loyalists will exhibit that loyalty by giving full support to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in his attempts to bring about reconciliation and a political solution? Second, will the Government now consider again whether it would be wise to begin an area by area programme of impounding arms held in private hands?

Mr. Channon: I note what the hon. Gentleman says in the second part of his question. As to the first part, I am sure that there will always be criticism, and it is right that there should be, because these are very difficult and complex matters; but I am sure that the vast majority of the House at least, and, I believe, the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland, understand the difficult problems in which we are engaged and realise how all of us must try to work now towards a political solution which will be acceptable to the over-whelming majority of the people.

Mr. Maude: Since the military operations in the no-go areas are clearly designed to restore rather than to reduce civil rights in Northern Ireland, will my hon. Friend agree that the extravagant statement issued today by the Civil Rights Association shows that it has become more a propaganda mouthpiece for the Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA than a genuine movement for constitutional reform?

Mr. Channon: I certainly agree with what my hon. Friend says inasmuch as one of the purposes of the army's action last night was to restore these areas to normality. It will result in restoration of civil rights rather than a reduction of them, and they will have their full civil rights. I give the clear undertaking for which the hon. Member for Leeds, South (Mr. Merlyn Rees) asked earlier, that there is no question of trying to act against one section of the community. We are trying impartially to restore order in all parts



of the community and to restore to people their normal civil rights, to free them from the intimidation of terror and the gunman under which they have laboured far too long.

Mr. Stallard: Will the hon. Gentleman accept that I particularly welcome his statement about there being no military solution, for that is what I and a number of others have been trying to establish for a long time, but will he accept that I - I can only speak personally - see this exercise today as attempting to impose a military solution? I think that, because of pressure from Northern Ireland and from hon. Members on the Government benches behind the Secretary of State - / Hon. Members: "Oh." / I think that this has been the result of Right-wing pressure, and I fear that the Government are embarking along the road which has already destroyed moderate opinion in Northern Ireland, and I do not share the optimism of those who see it as a success. On the contrary, I think that it has put us back many months, and a lot of hard work will have to be done to bring us back to the position we were part way to achieving. What I hope -

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must put a question.

Mr. Stallard: Will the hon. Gentleman accept that there seem to be two different approaches to the two different communities, in spite of what he said, with one approach to the Catholic community while, on the other hand, there are pictures of the Army in joint patrols with the UDA on the Protestant side? These pictures have been widely circulated. Will the Minister now take on board the impression given that there are two separate approaches to the two different communities?

Mr. Channon: The hon. Gentleman is entitled to his point of view, but I must refute what he says. My right hon. Friend's policy and the actions of the Army are not the result of two different approaches to the two communities. In fact, it is widely recognised by the majority of right hon. and hon. Members that during the past three months my right hon. Friend has been engaged in the very difficult task of trying to assure both communities in Northern Ireland that he wishes to act impartially in the interests of both. There is no attempt whatever - indeed, it would be foolish to try - to impose a military solution, but no one could indefinitely contemplate a situation in which terrorists and gunmen were operating without let or hindrance from a number of areas which have been used as bases. Such a situation was intolerable, and was the more seen to be intolerable, particularly after the events of 'Bloody Friday'. No one could have tried more than my right hon. Friend, by patience and determination, during the past three months to get the barriers down somehow. In view of that situation my right hon. Friend was reluctantly driven, I believe - to the decision which was taken to mount the military operation last night.

Rev. Ian Paisley: Will the hon. Gentleman take it that all right-thinking people in Northern Ireland will welcome the end of all no-go areas, especially the areas which have harboured those who have engaged in this campaign of crime, murder, anarchy and bloodshed? Will he convey to the Army the congratulations of the people of Northern Ireland, and their relief that the operation has not caused the bloodshed and death which many of us expected might be caused? I think that that was a fear widely felt among right hon. and hon. Members.

Has the Minister's attention been drawn to the statement by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Ireland that this action by the Army was on the brink of madness? What prior knowledge or information was fed to the Prime Minister of the Republic about the action to be taken by the British Army? Further, what steps are being



taken to see that no forays of IRA men come across the Border, since the Claudy incident today, in which a young child of nine and five other persons were brutally murdered, occurred in an area adjacent to the Border where these men can escape to freedom and the sanctuary of the Republic?

Mr. Channon: I am sure that the whole House will agree with the hon. Gentleman in his tribute to the troops, and I think that it will agree also about the need for an end to all no-go areas in Northern Ireland, whoever may be behind them. That is one of the purposes of the whole operation. I note the hon. Gentleman's views about the Border. I have not seen the statement to which he refers. [Hon. Members: "What statement?"] I have not seen the statement which the hon. Gentleman alleges was made, and, in view of that, it would, I think, be unwise to comment.

Mr. Hamling: We appreciate what the hon. Gentleman said about talks, but will he now reply to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, South (Mr. Merlyn Rees) about the long-term proposals which his right hon. Friends have for constitutional, political and economic reforms which they will put directly to this House and which will form the only conditions for ultimate peace?

Mr. Channon: As regards economic matters, my hon. Friend announced last week a series of economic measures to try to help Northern Ireland in its grave economic and employment difficulties. As regards the long-term political and constitutional future of Northern Ireland, it is my right hon. Friend's hope to hold a conference of the parties concerned in Northern Ireland, so that a conference of the people of Northern Ireland may try to determine their future rather than that there should be some solution imposed upon them by the British Government. This conference may or may not have a successful conclusion, but surely the attempt is worth making, and that is what my right hon. Friend is engaged in trying to do.

Mr. Powell: What measures will the Government take to ensure that the malefactors who have temporarily quitted the scene of their misdeeds do not return to resume them?

Mr. Channon: My right hon. Friend will know perfectly well that every effort will be made to bring to justice the malefactors who have escaped detection, at least at this moment, and every energy will be devoted to trying to achieve that.

Mr. Foley: The Minister has been very lucid about the immediate steps taken by the Army in the no-go areas. He has been less than clear about the next stages. Will he explain what proposals the Government have for policing the former no-go areas of the Creggan, the Bogside and Andersonstown? Will they be policed by the Army, a combination of the Army and the RUC, or by the RUC, or is some other arrangement to be made?

Mr. Channon: The operation was concluded only a few hours ago and I am not in a position this afternoon to give any long-term answers to these problems. I have already said that some measure of normal policing is under way in these areas and it is the Government's aim to try to restore them to normality at the earliest possible moment.

Mr. Speaker: There will be a debate later today on Northern Irish affairs and it will be fairly wide-ranging, and, therefore, I shall allow only one or two more questions.

Sir J. Langford-Holt: My hon. Friend the Minister and the hon. Member for Leeds, South (Mr. Merlyn Rees) have quite rightly stressed that



the military operation is not an end in itself. Will my hon. Friend assure the House that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will direct his attention to the sin of both religious bodies in Northern Ireland, which has been practised for many years, in that they bring up their children to hate, distrust and despise the children of the opposite religion?

Mr. Channon: My hon. Friend has made a very wide statement. I have met many people in Northern Ireland who would not agree with him.

Mr. Harold Wilson: My right hon. Friends and I associate ourselves with what my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, South (Mr. Merlyn Rees) said both as regards the need, which I think the Minister accepts, not only for maintaining but for redoubling the political initiative, and also the need to avoid anything that might be regarded as the hounding of civilians, particularly if it were selective and sectarian. Will the Minister give further thought to and discuss with the Secretary of State the point raised by more than one hon. Member this afternoon about the private holding of arms? Does the Minister recall that in the debate on 6th April last year we raised from this Front Bench the question whether there should not be an almost total ban on arms in Northern Ireland, that all existing gun licences should be withdrawn and that there should be mandatory prison sentences for anyone caught with guns in his possession, whatever section of the community he may come from? - [Interruption.]

Mr. Mellish: Why not?

Mr. Wilson: I include explosives, of course. When we proposed this a year last April we said that one advantage would be that the security authorities could then freely enter any house where there was reason for suspicion without its being felt that the authorities were going only to houses of one religious or political persuasion. Some estimates, particularly in the light of illegal smuggling of arms on both sides, would suggest that the figure I gave then of 100,000 arms privately-held in Northern Ireland must now be about 150,000 of arms alone. Should not the whole lot be impounded, because this is as much a part of the United Kingdom as Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool or Leeds? It is not the fact that about 10 per cent. of the population in these cities hold arms legally or illegally.

Mr. Channon: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his opening remarks and certainly I confirm that it is our intention to proceed as fast as possible with political measures. I repeat the undertaking that I have given other hon. Members about the treatment of civilians. The Army has been scrupulously careful in these operations to treat civilians with the minimum inconvenience possible. As for the arms, this is a complicated matter which has been discussed over a number of years but I shall certainly undertake to discuss the matter with the Secretary of State at the earliest opportunity.

Mr. Wilson: The question of arms is a difficult matter. It is 16 months since the suggestion was first put forward from this side. I do not wish to press the hon. Gentleman today. He must report to the Secretary of State. But can we be told what are the difficulties, because it is clear that the cause of deaths in Northern Ireland is malevolence and evil allied with weapons? If the evil and the malevolence cannot be stamped out immediately, at least something can be done about the weapons.

Mr. Channon: I undertake that I shall urgently consider the matter with my right hon. Friend and I shall give the right hon. Gentleman an answer at an early and convenient opportunity.



Mr. Deedes: Will the Minister accept that at least one consequence of today's operation may well be to impose much heavier responsibilities on the Republic.

Mr. Channon: I think a heavy responsibility rests on all responsible people in Ireland at the present time, because the activities of the Provisional IRA threaten the security and lives of people in all parts of the island.

Mr. McNamara: The Minister's answer about the policing of these areas in the future left a lot to be desired and made us wonder what the Government's contingency plans were. Is the Minister aware that long before the Provisional IRA took over the Creggan and the Bogside, and before it was active in Andersonstown and other parts of Belfast, the RUC was not accepted there by the minority population as an impartial police force in the way that the police force in one of our cities would be accepted? It is therefore incumbent upon the Minister to reassure the minority not only about arms held legally or illegally but about policing. There should be adequate consultation with community leaders in these areas about the re-introduction of police forces on a credible basis so that the minority can feel that the police are no longer their enemy, as they were long before the Provisional IRA came in, but that they can be trusted like the English bobby. When will that happen?

Mr. Channon: The House recognises that the question of policing is extremely complicated and is one of the most difficult matters which faces us in Northern Ireland. My noble Friend the joint Minister of State is in Londonderry at this very moment, I believe, and is having wide-ranging discussions with representatives of the people there. I am sure these are among the matters which will be discussed. The operation was concluded at only about 7 o'clock this morning and no long-term plans can be laid. There is some policing at the present time. I shall draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the points raised by hon. Members this afternoon.