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Northern Ireland Situation

Comments of the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs on the Memorandum from the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

1. It is certainly correct that a very grave danger of civil war in Northern Ireland exists and that if it comes it will have shattering physical, social, economic and political consequences in the Republic.
2. The question is, how can we best use our very limited capacity to influence the situation, in such a way as to help to avert such a disaster, now threatening all the people on this island?
3. The Department of Foreign Affairs paper asks consideration for the idea of some form of UN Trusteeship for Northern Ireland involving a UN (Military?) presence there preferably "an internationally agreed presence by agreement involving both communities in Northern Ireland and the two sovereign Governments" (Paragraph 21).
4. It is right, in the present very nearly desperate situation, to give consideration to anything that may offer hope of averting civil war. It is also necessary that such consideration should be realistic, and that hopes resting on illusions should be dispelled. To my mind the idea that a UN trusteeship and a UN force could avert civil war in Northern Ireland is illusory.
5. It is certainly true that an internationally agreed presence 'by agreement involving both communities in Northern Ireland'... would achieve this purpose. But what chances are there of achieving such agreement? There might well be some welcome for it in the Catholic community, as a possible way of averting the dangers which now hang over that community, and also possibly as a transitional step towards a united

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Ireland. But what chances are there of the acceptance, by the Protestant community, of the replacement of British troops by a mixed foreign force implementing a trusteeship system in the shaping of which this Republic would have a voice? To my mind - and I speak from fairly long experience of Northern Ireland - there is absolutely no chance of acceptance of such a formula by the Protestant community generally, and in particular by the Protestant working class, which in my view would certainly react explosively to the introduction of this entirely new and unfamiliar element into the situation. A UN force, itself unfamiliar with the situation, would have much less hope of containing this explosion even than the British Army has of controlling violence at present levels.

6. It is true that individual Loyalist leaders may toy with such ideas for one reason or another. But the fact is that such leaders have power only in so far as they reflect the fundamental feelings of those whom they represent. Faulkner found it impossible to sell Sunningdale; it would not be easier, but very much harder, to sell the more unfamiliar package of UN trusteeship to a population notably inaccessible to new ideas.
7. Not only is the idea unworkable in itself, if attempted inside Northern Ireland, but it would be particularly dangerous for this Government even to be seen to entertain it. There is no doubt that the British Government - and Harold Wilson in particular - would dearly like to get rid of Northern Ireland if they could do so without the international obloquy that would be drawn on them by the consequences of simple withdrawal. If however an Irish Government were even to hint at the possibility of UN trusteeship, this would offer the British Government exactly what we must assume they want: the possibility of

honourable withdrawal. The United Nations would carry the direct responsibility for the consequences, and the indirect but very close responsibility would be carried by the Irish Government which advised this solution. These consequences would in my view involve civil war on a scale which the UN forces would have no hope of controlling. (I would not rule out some UN role in a British withdrawal situation, but I think it would be unrealistic to put it higher than a ceasefire-line role).

8. The fact is that there are no attractive solutions to the Northern Ireland situation, and no wide range of choice. Either the British stay or they go. If they stay, the prospects are for, at best, prolongation into an indefinite future of roughly the present levels of violence and intimidation. If they go, (in present states of community ill-feeling) the pin is out of the bomb of civil war and neither our own army nor the UN nor anything else on earth will prevent that. In these circumstances the aim of our policy should in my view be to make it as difficult as possible for the British to extricate themselves from their present responsibilities. Ideas like UN trusteeship or independent Northern Ireland with guarantees for the minority tend to let the British off a hook on which it is in the interests of the over-whelming majority of the people in this island to keep them.
9. As regards the SDLP I think that while we must have much sympathy with them in their appalling predicament, we should not allow that sympathy to express itself by encouraging hopes that we can do or bring about things that we cannot do or bring about. In particular I think that we should be uncompromisingly negative on the question of military intervention from our side. The consequences of such

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intervention could only be self-defeating (Taoiseach's Department Memorandum Paragraph 9 (3) and 12 (1)). In paragraph 16 of the same memorandum it is stated : "It might be pointed out to them, if they press the point, that circumstances require that the threat of Southern intervention in the North, in co-operation with the British Army or otherwise, is at its most potent if kept in the background as an implication rather than expressed verbally or by action".

I would have very serious doubts as to whether we should even go as far as this. It seems to me that any statement on these lines might well be misinterpreted or misrepresented as implying some contingent commitment. To my mind the implicit threat in question, in the background of the provisional campaign is not a factor tending to reduce violence, but one tending to inflame it.

In addition, the implication by Daithi Ó Conaill (on the recent ITV programme 'Weekend World') that, in the situation which might follow a British withdrawal, the IRA would seek to bring down the institutions of the Republic cannot be ignored. It makes it necessary to seriously question any contingency planning assumptions which do not provide for sufficient resources held ready to meet such a threat.