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Overflights

British request

Standing authority for British helicopters to patrol to a depth of 10-15 kilometres into the jurisdiction. Mrs. Thatcher on 5 September referred to "constant surveillance across the border, day in, day out."

Response

Regular everyday surveillance by British helicopters would be neither useful nor permissible.

As an alternative, we could consider permitting a limited but renewable quota of overflights which could be flown without detailed clearance but subject to certain strict conditions, provided the practical problems could be eliminated.

Presentation to British

1. Situation on southern side different from north. Local intelligence superior to aerial reconnaissance.
2. If they demonstrate that there is information which *we have 5/8* would justify regular aerial reconnaissance, we would need *100 tonnes* their assistance in acquiring the capability to carry out such reconnaissance.
3. Helicopters are more obvious and more vulnerable than the fixed wing craft hitherto used on aerial reconnaissance. Their presence close to or on the border would require ground cover by southern security forces. Such cover on a regular basis would be enormously consumptive of Garda/Army manpower and on an exceptional basis would require time to deploy. Once deployed, the need for the overflight would be largely eliminated.
4. The British Army is not popular along the South Armagh border. The Irish security forces are accepted. It would lead to a loss of effectiveness if this acceptability were to be undermined, for example by too obvious a collaboration.
5. While reconnaissance gives rise to no political objections, any substantive activity by the British Army south of the border could quickly give rise to political and legal problems as well as the obvious administrative and security difficulties. For example we could not under any circumstances envisage the British Army apprehending within our jurisdiction people or shooting.

*agreed that there is a deterrent effect
of SA in Armagh is
helicopter country*

6. Regular overflying would enable the IRA to set traps within our jurisdiction for the British Army. In the light of the absolute ban on firing by the British Army in our jurisdiction, such traps would put the helicopter and troops in question in an impossible position.

7. The attitudes in the previous two paragraphs are based on an unwillingness to trust the discipline and good sense of the British Army. No Government here could run the risk of an innocent civilian being shot in cross-fire, in anger, by mistake or in confusion by a British Army unit operating within the state with the Government's permission.

8. We are not aware of incidents in which pursuit has had to stop at the border. On the contrary, we are aware of concern among Northern security forces that IRA terrorists can cross half a county after an incident without fear of being apprehended. *in the north*

9. At present overflight permission is readily granted on request for the purpose of aerial reconnaissance along the border, including the identification of suspect objects and locations.

10. A corridor of 10-15 miles would take in a considerable number of urban areas and military establishments.

11. What communications would they propose (necessarily British Army to Garda if the object of the overflight is to apprehend suspects).

12. If our idea of a quota of overflights is accepted there is a considerable range of conditions we would have to apply - e.g. depth, altitude, behaviour, circumstances. It would seem desirable to establish an official working party within the next few days to clarify the details.

13. Necessary to be clear on liability for damage to helicopter on the one hand and, on the other, damage caused by it. (Our experience with British settlement of claims for damage caused by their forces to property on this side of the border is very unsatisfactory: there have been claims totalling up to £1 million outstanding for several years past.)

Preparatory Official Meeting

1. What precisely are they seeking. Daily flights?
Incident related flights?

Are they looking for what security cover do they
X 2. What ground cover do they consider appropriate and necessary?

would
X 3. What wll they do if attacked?

Level 3 and 4
what of vulnerability due to lack of ground cover because
Level 3, 4

4. Will helicopters be armed?

5. Will they be giving special training to flight crews, in particular navigators?

6. Have there been incidents in which pursuit by helicopter has had to stop at the border? Or where criminals have failed to be apprehended because British were not permitted freely to overfly the border? (Or lives were lost?) - before ministerial meeting

Put up earlier