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3 September 1979

STRICT EMBARGO: 14.15 HRS TODAY

SPEECH BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND, THE RIGHT HON HUMPHREY ATKINS MP,
AT NEWRY AND MOURNE DISTRICT COUNCIL.

It was only six days ago that I saw at first hand the dreadful aftermath of the explosion at Narrow Water. I feel it is right that I should return to this area once more to assure the people of Newry and Mourne and indeed all the people of Northern Ireland, of my own and the Government's resolve that the men who have carried out these foul crimes will be stopped, however long it takes.

The murders of 27 August have brought condemnation from all round the world. From the USA, from Rome, and even Moscow, have come powerful attacks on these evil men.

I want to re-emphasise today the Government's total commitment to ensuring that those responsible for these and for all other acts of terrorism are brought to justice. Many people have sacrificed their lives to protect us from the terrorist. That sacrifice must not be in vain.

The police and the Army are putting their all into the struggle. And I am backing them to the hilt.

The Government's aim remains the same - to defeat terrorism and to extend normal policing throughout Northern Ireland. We shall not tolerate terrorism from whatever source. We shall use the full strength of the law, of the police, and of the Army to deal with the Provisional IRA, and with others who seek through terrorism to plunge this country into chaos and civil disorder.

It is because we are determined on this that the Army is deployed here in such strength in support of the Police. There are no less than 13,000 members of the regular Army, together with some 7,000 members of the UDR in Northern Ireland, to back up the Police in the implementation of the Government's aims. The Army will remain in such strength as is needed for as long as it is needed.

At the same time I am determined that we shall press ahead with the extension of normal policing throughout the Province. The RUC has doubled in size in recent years and so has increased its capacity to maintain law and order. But this is not enough and you will know that last week I approved the Police Authority's proposal to increase the strength of the force to 7,500 full-time officers. In addition, the full-time Reserve will be brought up to its target strength of 1,400.

I have emphasised the importance of the police and of the extension of normal policing because to me this underlines two crucial points. First, we are working towards a Northern Ireland which is at peace with itself and where the whole of the task of keeping the law will rest with the police. Second, I am determined that we continue to deal with terrorists through the law: I am sometimes told that there are many things we should try to do to defeat the terrorist. Some of these are very draconian.

But if we abandon the normally accepted standards of law, then we are playing into the terrorists' hands. That is exactly what they want us to do. They want to break down our society. Their own law is the law of the jungle and if we follow them into that jungle then they are on their way to what they want.

Only yesterday we had another example of their kind of justice, when a young mother, in her baby's presence, was shot through both arms and legs as a punishment. Some justice.

It is the Government's declared aim to return to the people of the Province more control of their own affairs. It is my responsibility to ensure as far as I can that when that time comes Northern Ireland is a stable, law abiding democratic community.

I must therefore act in such a way as to create a respect for the law and for those whose duty it is to uphold and administer it.

The greatest threat is the Provisional IRA - an organisation devoid of idealism and any political principle. I do not make the mistake of underestimating them. Their threat is to the people of Northern Ireland and, from the speeches of their leaders,

to the Republic also. They attack the security forces by cowardly stealth, and because they are utterly callous they also slaughter some of the most defenceless people in Northern Ireland. Their bombs are aimed at old people's homes as well as at police landrovers; they kill women and children at bus stops as well as soldiers on patrol.

We all know that there are particular areas in which terrorist activity is concentrated. I am determined that even greater attention will be given by the security forces to those areas and to those activities of which our intelligence warns.

There have in recent months been significant re-enforcement of the areas along the border. We have been deploying the forces' Specialist Units such as the SAS who are here to use their very special skills in coping with the terrorist. We have been using to the full our various specialist resources, leading, for example, to the detection and arrest in Belfast a few weeks ago of a dozen people who have been charged with offences in connection with eavesdropping on security forces communications.

The visible presence of the Army and the police on the streets of Northern Ireland is only part of the story. Increasingly nowadays their effort is being devoted to covert operations aimed at observing the terrorist as he plans his crimes and taking the measures necessary to forestall him or to catch him in the act. By definition much of this activity goes on away from the public view. We must adapt our methods to meet current threats and I am encouraging the Security Forces to do this.

The terrible carnage at Narrow Water was not a question of new tactics on the part of the Provisional IRA. The tragedy of this ambush was the fearfully high death toll.

Both the Army and the police are very well aware of the risks they run. They know the dangers, they take all the precautions they can and they get on with the job. I have already paid tribute to their courage and devotion and I gladly do so again. The passing months in Northern Ireland serve only to increase my respect for the sheer guts and determination of the young and the not so young soldiers and policemen who daily risk their lives to protect us.

Our successes do not attract the same attention as the crimes themselves: the arrest of a terrorist is rarely such a dramatic event as the murder of a soldier or policeman. But let there be no mistake that in a persistent way the security forces have been totting up an impressive score of successes over the months.

As a result of patient, skilled work, 380 people have been arrested and charged with terrorist offences so far this year - 29 with murder and 21 with attempted murder. These include men charged with the murder of the 4 police officers when their landrover was blown up near Bessbrook in April; with the murder of two policemen at Cullyhanna in June; with the murder of the female prison officer in Armagh in April; with the murder of a Salvation Army officer in Portadown in July, and with the murder of 2 soldiers near Armagh in August. On Saturday, a woman was charged with the murder of 2 soldiers in Andersonstown in April.

No less than 40 life sentences have been imposed this year - and that means life.

The success of the police and of the Army does not rest along on charges and convictions. It also includes in a large measure the action they take to prevent acts of terrorism in the first place. Nearly a ton of explosives has been intercepted this year, some of it in the form of bombs already planted, and defused by Army experts at great personal risk. Among these finds were 42 bombs, each packed with about 10 lbs of explosives, found in Short Strand earlier this year. Not only would those have caused enormous damage, had they gone to their targets, but they put at terrible risk the people who were living unsuspectingly beside them.

In Newry you will be well aware of the crucial importance of action by the authorities of the Republic of Ireland. We in Northern Ireland and the authorities in the South have a common interest in defeating the terrorists and we shall continue to search for ways of improving the effectiveness of our common effort. I will not say more about this today. As you know, the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach are meeting on Wednesday.

I have talked at some length about security and I think it right that I should share these views with you. But of course there are other pressing concerns. As you know, I have taken the initiative in asking the leaders of the Northern Ireland political parties to discuss with me how best we can achieve the return of responsibility for the governing of the Province to locally elected people.

It is beyond question that the current security situation constitutes a major stumbling block in our efforts to find some form of political agreement.

Since what we are seeking is a solution for the people of Northern Ireland it follows that it be a solution by the people of Northern Ireland. That is why it is the recognised political leaders that I have been consulting, and I look forward to the moment when I can present the outcome of my consultations in the proper place - the Parliament of the United Kingdom.

Whether we are speaking of political progress or security, it is the whole community that is involved. People in Northern Ireland rightly look to me to ensure that the Government and the Security Forces do not let up in their hunt for the terrorists. I am often told that there is more that could be done.

With the Chief Constable and the GOC I am constantly examining new ideas and giving fresh thought to old ones. I have strengthened our arrangements for reviewing and co-ordinating these matters. I will not hesitate to implement new measures if I think they are right.

But I cannot carry the struggle against the Provisional IRA alone. Nor can the police or Army. We are all involved. We are all threatened. We all stand to gain from the end of terrorism. We must all contribute to it.