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Crossmaglen GAA Grounds

Meeting at Department of Foreign Affairs, 5 March 1980

Present:

S. O hUiginn	Department of Foreign Affairs
G. O'Connor	Department of Foreign Affairs
B. Smith	British Embassy

Mr. Smith elaborated on the situation at the Crossmaglen GAA grounds as seen by the British authorities. Last November the GAA had indicated that they wished to build a 2ft wall topped by a twenty foot fence around the pitch. The British told them such a fence would come within 10 metres of the helipad currently in use and would make it difficult for helicopters to land safely. The GAA were requested to delay building the wall/fence until the helipad could be relocated from its present position on to a site within the Army/RUC base.

At the end of January the GAA said they would put it up anyway. They proceeded to do so and it was subsequently removed by the British Army. In early February an Order was issued under Section 19(2) (C and D) of the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1978 under which obstacles up to the 21 yard line (from the goal line) can be removed. A map indicating the area affected was annexed to the Order. There was no new requisition order.

Last Saturday, 1 March, the GAA put a fence on top of the two foot wall and this was removed by the Army early on Monday morning. The Crown Agent, Mr. Keenan met Fr. Moran and other GAA officials on Monday afternoon, but those on the GAA side left the meeting soon afterwards and said they would take the matter to Dublin. Mr. Smith pointed out that the fence had been removed in a way that would permit it to be rebuilt. It was expected that the new helipad in the base would be completed in early summer, although this was not definite.

Mr. O Higin made the following points

1. There appeared to be a lack of appreciation on the part of the British Army of the repercussions of the whole affair, of the political interest taken in the matter at the highest level here and of the impact on public opinion. Allied to this was the likely impact of the incidents in forthcoming GAA conventions.
  
2. The fence issue was however only part of the wider problem. The GAA feel they have been exposed to broken or evaded promises on the whole question of the Army presence at the pitch. They <sup>(GAA)</sup> had made a significant effort in 1978 to reach agreement which involved amongst other things a relocation of the helipad, higher overflying of the pitch by British helicopters, minimum use of the football ground entrance by the British Army and removal of rubble at the entrance. They considered that this agreement collapsed because the British Army had failed to keep its part of the bargain.
  
3. As regards the need for the fence the CAA Armagh County Board have regulations that playing fields must be enclosed and in addition the Crossmaglen Club considered that absence of enclosure fencing had legal implications as regards their control of the pitch. They had a clear impression that erection of the fence had been accepted in the Army.

Mr. Smith replied:

- (i) The man who was secured to remove the rubble was in the GAA himself but Smith could only speculate as to why the rubble was still there.
  
- (2) As regards Army attitudes it was a fact that people in the Army get killed in the area and therefore the Army has to consider factors other than the sensitivities of the GAA. The first priority is to avoid getting men killed.

(3) The GAA had not supplied a fixture list to help the Army plan helicopter overflights of the pitch. Mr. O hUiginn said that a fixture list was not a cut and dried description of activity on the playing field. People came at irregular hours to tog out and train on a fairly spontaneous basis.

Mr. O hUiginn said the basic objective should be to tackle the problem head on by relocating the helipad. Mr. Smith said that relocation was expected to be completed by the end of the summer, but this was not certain. He asked if we might "go up to Croke Park" to discuss the situation at the Crossmaglen Club with the GAA authorities. Mr. O hUiginn replied that the first task was to clear the lines with the British Army to get the Army to make a serious commitment on the relocation of the helipad. If this commitment could be relied on the matter could then be put to the GAA. We must redress the substance of the problem. Mr. Smith said that the Army had removed the fence but not the two foot wall. Therefore the field is legally enclosed. Mr. O hUiginn considered it was not very useful to distinguish between the political and legal problems. What was needed was a genuine and high level undertaking within the British Army to resolve the situation. The key to this was to relocate the helipad to within the Army/RUC base. Mr. Smith asked how soon would we need such an undertaking. In reply Mr. O hUiginn said that GAA officers had apparently had restrained the Crossmaglen Club from major public protest. There was no deadline, in the sense that the Club or GAA were free to launch such a protest whenever they chose. On the other hand, the matter was of great urgency. The Taoiseach took a very live personal interest in the matter and would want to see early results. There was a great disproportion between the trivial factors giving rise to the situation and the potential political repercussions. It was in the interests of both Governments to remove such an unnecessary irritant. The key to everything was clearly the relocation of the helipad, something which could hardly take much time if there was a serious commitment to it. This commitment would need to be reliable, so as not to add to the impression of bad faith which the Club had got, and

reasonably early. As regards deadlines, it was obvious that if the matter were still unresolved at the time of the proposed meeting between the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, it would have to be raised then and could be a contentious issue which would have to surface in the public presentation of the meeting on our side. There seemed every reason to avoid this, and given goodwill, every possibility of doing so. Mr. Smith said he would convey these views to his authorities and concurred in the general view that it was in the interests of both Governments to defuse the situation.