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SECURE FAX NO.189

IMMEDIATE

18 February 1992

TO: HQ FROM: BELFAST Pages: 2

FOR: A/Sec O hUiginn FROM: Joint Secretary

Incident at Coalisland

To confirm: Robert Alston came back late this afternoon with the following information.

1. The incident began with the attack on Coalisland police station (shortly after 10.30 pm) at which a very substantial number of shots were fired from a 12.7 mm machine gun and a number of other weapons. The machine gun which was found at the site of the subsequent shoot-out together with AR47s is believed to be part of a pre-Eksund shipment. There were 18 or 20 people inside the police sangar which was penetrated by the firing. It is regarded as a miracle that nobody inside was killed or wounded.

2. Five minutes after this attack uniformed soldiers came across a truck and a car in the car park of St Patrick's Catholic church nearby. There were other vehicles in the car park but not apparently a van (as reported). What then happened is now being investigated but the result was that four men were shot dead, one was injured and one soldier was injured in exchanges of fire in and around the churchyard. At least two vehicles got away. One was found burnt out and abandoned in the car park of the GAA club at Coalisland. A second car tried to break through a vehicle check point near Stewartstown. A second injured man was discovered in one of these cars. Others in the cars escaped.

3. It follows from this account that the British believe that more than six men were involved in these incidents, they calculate twelve or more.

4. The police are reluctant to confirm formally the identities of any of the dead or injured as of now (although they appear to have been confirming the identities unofficially to the press). They say that the families of the victims are not cooperating with them which is making identification difficult. Media reports this afternoon say that the dead are Kevin O'Donnell, Sean O'Farrell, Peter Clancy and Patrick Vincent, that O'Donnell was acquitted of terrorist charges at the Old Bailey last March, that charges against O'Farrell were dropped, that Clancy was questioned at Gough Barracks several times but never charged and that nothing is known of Patrick Vincent. The injured men have not been named in the media.

5. In response to my question, Alston confirmed that the soldiers who encountered the truck and car at St. Patrick's church were uniformed and that there were no other soldiers in the vicinity out of uniform. He put down the contradictory local account of casually dressed men in trainers to confusion, possibly deliberate confusion. Alston said the local parish priest was regarded by them as having republican sympathies. He was certainly not cooperative with the police.

6. The British are not yet sure that all of those killed and injured had IRA connections. Jim Canning, for example, has told them that he believes the man injured in the church car park was an innocent by-stander. The soldiers concerned in the shooting have now been interviewed, and have not, following normal practice, been instantly returned to duty but neither have they been formally suspended.

7. There have been contradictory views within the British system about the damage to St Patrick's church which seemed extensive from local reports and TV pictures. At one point today the Army civilian representatives thought the cost of repair would run to four rather than five figures. Alston rang back later to cast doubt on this view and to say it was being checked.

8. Alston has given the above information - or at least that part of it which has not appeared in the media - on a confidential basis and with the usual warning that in these sorts of incidents initial accounts can be faulty.

Postscript: The British side have just now (6pm) gained official confirmation from the RUC that the identities of the dead men are as given above.