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Embassy of Ireland
Tehran

The Secretary
Dept of Foreign Affairs

23 November 1993

President Rafsanjani engaged me in a substantive discussion on the Government's policy on Northern Ireland this morning when I presented my credentials (separate report). This part of the meeting lasted about twenty minutes. The Chief of Protocol told me it was most unusual for the President to spend so much time (about double) or to go beyond the ceremonial format. He said this showed that the President took a keen personal interest in the subject and wished to check his own knowledge against what I had to say.

After the customary exchange of prepared statements and subsequent courtesy remarks, the President asked me a series of questions about Northern Ireland with particular emphasis on any sympathy the Government might have with the IRA, whether the Irish people sympathised with the IRA, whether we did not share common objectives with the IRA, and did we regard the British Government as the main obstacle to unification.

I had the impression that the President tended to see the conflict in Northern Ireland as an anti-imperialist struggle in the classical sense, with the British Government as the obstacle to peace, and the Irish people and (possibly) the Government in basic sympathy with the IRA's aims and showing an understanding (at the least) for their methods. This is, of course, only an impression based on the general drift of the questions and not on anything explicit.

My objective in responding to the President's questions was to make it completely clear [i] that the Government's condemnation of the IRA and all violent means is unequivocal, [ii] that our commitment to peaceful means and unity by consent is total and genuine and without any hint of lip service, and [iii] that we see the UK Government as a partner with whom we are engaged in long-term cooperation to bring about a peaceful solution.

President Rafsanjani began by asking me about the current reports emerging from Ireland and Britain of rekindled hopes for an early settlement of the conflict - **Did these negotiations represent some new initiative ?**

I responded by outlining the history of the efforts of the Irish and British Governments to work together to find a settlement to the tragic conflict in Northern Ireland; I explained that the current talks were a continuation of that peace process; Anglo-Irish cooperation was not new. However, there was a new element in that the recent escalation of the violence imposed even greater urgency on the efforts to achieve peace. Otherwise, even greater suffering would be inflicted on both communities.

The President then asked: **What was the real underlying cause of the enmity between the two communities in Northern Ireland?**

I set out briefly the historical roots of the Northern conflict, and emphasised that the conflict was more akin to a post-colonial situation than to a religious one, as was often mistakenly thought. I said that the roots of the conflict were essentially twofold. One was a lengthy history of discrimination against the minority community, fuelling discontent. The other -equally important - was the coexistence of two distinct national identities.

The President then asked: **Did the Irish Government have sympathy with the IRA?**

I replied that the Irish Government totally rejected and condemned any form of violence or coercion, that we pursued an exclusively peaceful solution based on reconciliation between the two communities and that, far from condoning any attempt to coerce an unwilling majority to join our Republic, the Government had banned the IRA.

The President then enquired: **Did the Irish people have sympathy with the IRA?**

I replied that the overwhelming majority of the Irish people equally rejected the IRA, as shown by election results, and were fully behind the Government's policies. Only a tiny minority had any sympathy with the IRA. Virtually the entire population was sickened by this violence which was alien to the traditions of the Irish people.

The President pressed the point still further: **Did not the Government and people and the IRA pursue the same objective?**

I said that at a general and abstract level we pursued the same goal, Irish unity. But once an effort began to translate that ideal into reality, any similarity of view disappeared. The Irish Government and people had no interest in a concept of unity which was merely territorial unification imposed by force. We sought a unity of people, brought about by consent. We held the firm view that the violent methods of the IRA had held back progress towards Irish unity by decades and that their actions only frustrated the entire objective of unity through reconciliation.

Finally, the President asked : **Did the Irish Government see Britain as the main obstacle to peace and unity?**

I replied that, on the contrary, the Irish and British Governments were working together to bring about a peaceful solution and that the British Government had stated that it would not stand in the way if a majority in Northern Ireland favoured Irish unification.

The conversation then concluded on a friendly note. The President wished me well and I thanked him for the interest he had shown. Despite what I felt was the President's underlying trend of thought, I found his manner of questioning friendly and open to our views, which he encouraged me to develop in as much detail as I thought necessary. At the end of the interview, I felt that I had been given an invaluable opportunity to brief the President (who is head of the Government as well as Head of State, there being no position of Prime Minister) on the basic realities of Northern Ireland and the Government's position, in particular our total opposition to violence or coercion in any form.

A.E. Mannix

A E Mannix
Ambassador

c.c. Asst. Secretary S O h'Uiginn ✓
Asst. Secretary T Barrington