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DEFENCE DEBATE 17 OCTOBER

DRAFT OPENING SPEECH - SECRETARY OF STATE

NORTHERN IRELAND EXTRACT

We do not pretend that there is a military solution to the problems in Northern Ireland. The problems are essentially political ones, which require a combination of political, social, economic and security measures to resolve. The Government has made strenuous efforts on all these fronts, and there are grounds for believing that we are making progress.

In this context, the Government was greatly encouraged by the Provisionals' announcement of a ceasefire. There have now been no terrorist attacks by PIRA for over 6 weeks. We are also very encouraged by the announcement last week of a ceasefire by the loyalist paramilitaries. We very much hope that all these groups intend a permanent end to violence, and we are assessing whether we can yet make a working assumption that this is so. But in any case, we can not - dare not - assume that now or in the near future there will suddenly no longer be a need for military support to the RUC. All the terrorist groupings still retain a substantial capability for carrying out further acts of violence without notice. It is a matter for the Chief Constable and the GOC Northern Ireland, as the operational commanders, to judge how their forces should be deployed in present circumstances, but the Government must ensure that they have the necessary resources available to ensure the security of the people of Northern Ireland. We will continue to keep force levels under review to ensure that they are appropriate. I very much hope that, in time, the security situation will permit us to reduce force levels, but it would be irresponsible to

do so prematurely. As we made clear in the White Paper, 'as soon as the terrorists on both sides renounce violence, and fully demonstrate their commitment to doing so, the armed forces will progressively be withdrawn from the streets. They will then return to their peacetime role, so that normal policing can resume throughout Northern Ireland. But in the meantime, the armed forces will continue steadfastly to support the RUC for as long as the terrorists make it necessary.' I can confirm that we stand by those commitments today.

But that does not mean that there is no scope for flexibility. As the House will be aware, a number of measures have already been taken to reduce the profile of the Armed Forces in Northern Ireland, but without reducing security or vigilance. The GOC - with the full agreement of the Chief Constable - has taken steps to make the posture of military patrols appear less aggressive to the public. For example, soldiers have been patrolling for some weeks now in regimental headdress, without camouflage cream. And my Rt Hon and Learned Friend, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, has announced the reopening of a number of closed border crossing points. These measures have been very much welcomed by many ordinary members of the public in Northern Ireland.

In the coming months, provided that the terrorist threat permits, the GOC, in consultation with the Chief Constable, intends to implement further measures to reduce the impact of the Armed Forces' operations

on the ordinary people of Northern Ireland. We all look forward to the restoration of normality in Northern Ireland. I can assure the House that the Armed Forces will continue to play a full part in contributing to the restoration of normality by whatever means are appropriate. It can never be normal for soldiers to be deployed on the streets of the United Kingdom. Our aim is to remove soldiers from the streets of Northern Ireland - but when it is safe to do so, and not a moment sooner.