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IMMEDIATE

28 July

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TO: HQ

FROM: BELFAST

FOR: A/SEC O HUIGINN

FROM: JOINT SECRETARY

Mr B. O'Kelly for appropriate action with D/Tasneach & D/Justice

Major works at Newtownhamilton and related matters

1. The British told us yesterday they would brief today on the proposed refurbishment of the military base at Newtownhamilton, Co. Armagh (Mr. Farrell's SF 435). The Under Secretary in charge of security, John Steele, and the Assistant Secretary, Nick Perry, came in late this afternoon. Arising from the recent helicopter incident in Newtownhamilton, they propose to "harden" the military base and the separate helicopter landing site. The main purpose will be to proof against attack with the Mark 15 mortar which is capable of propelling 200 lbs of explosives, at wall-clearing height, over a distance of 250 metres. They emphasised their extreme concern about the Mark 15 which had come near to causing a major disaster at the RIR base on the Malone Road in Belfast recently (you will recall that there were injuries to guests at a wedding nearby). That bomb completely destroyed the cookhouse at Malone Road and but for exceptional luck would have caused very high casualties.
2. They also emphasised that the IRA were fully operational and dangerous at the present time; they referred to the major find at Athboy of which they had heard details through police channels (Steele did not draw any conclusions about Sinn Fein/IRA intentions in regard to the peace process; he agreed that the IRA could be expected to maintain a high level of activity before they made any concession and he pointed out that this is what they had always done in the past).
3. The nature of the work at Newtownhamilton will be similar to that recently done at Crossmaglen but will take "a good deal longer". In response to our question, the British said that the work could be expected to take twice as long or more, which, granted that Crossmaglen took ten weeks, implies a duration of about six months. There will be VCPs on the Crossmaglen model, the work will cause considerable inconvenience, Newry Street, which is currently closed to vehicular traffic, will be closed to pedestrian traffic for safety reasons, two sangars will be built, one in the base, one at the helicopter site, both about 13 metres high which is smaller than the sangar built at Crossmaglen. Work is

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expected to begin in mid-August. Cover will be requested on our side. We mentioned that Newtownhamilton is further inside the border than Crossmaglen. The British agreed, but said the main purpose of cover would be to deter attacks by IRA South Armagh and the level of assistance to be requested would be on approximately the same level as Crossmaglen although the number of soldiers required for protection on their side would not be so high as in that operation. I pointed out that the strain on our side would be greater this time because of the considerably longer duration anticipated.

4. We pointed out that the work will cause even greater inconvenience than at Crossmaglen because the military base is sited in the centre of the town. The British agreed that this will be so, but said that everything will be done to minimise the problem and to maintain good relations with the local community. We asked about the effect on business and pedestrian traffic in the town centre. The British accepted that there will be a considerable effect; the Army estimate of the pedestrian diversion necessary was 350 metres; there would be no compensation to businesses which they said is the norm in these cases (this is a point to which we might revert when we have gauged the likely effect for ourselves).
5. The local MP, Seamus Mallon, will be personally briefed by the Secretary of State. Other local people will be briefed later. The DCC operations will make an approach to the Garda Siochana in relation to cover. We will be told at least at the same time as the police, if not earlier, of the precise date of the beginning of operations.
6. Analysis of Crossmaglen operation

Steele said the Crossmaglen operation had gone off without casualties and had been completed before time. The base was now proof against attack with the Mark 15 mortar. They felt that by being fully open with the public about the scale of the operation, by getting in numbers of civil representatives to deal with problems, by removing checkpoints at the earliest possible moment and by finishing before time (ten weeks instead of twelve weeks), they had earned credit. In fact, they believed that relations between the security forces and the community were now better (?) than before the operation. The one mistake they had made was in relation to ourselves. The only reason (?) they had been so reticent about the Crossmaglen operation was the extreme nervousness of the Army about likely casualties; it was not due to any lack of confidence in our discretion. They now had instructions from Ministers to be fully open with us.

7. Work at Kilturk base/Re-opening of Clonatty Bridge

We asked what level of cover might be requested for the work at the Kilturk base (our SF 435) which is due to begin on 23 September. They said some assistance will be requested, but it is expected to be low-level and should be capable of being dealt with by local police on either side of the border. They regarded this operation as a relatively minor one. We asked if the re-opening of Clonatty Bridge, which the Secretary of State confirmed here on Monday evening, was connected with the work at the Kilturk base. Steele said it was; they had been thinking of opening the crossing anyway but they felt it would be especially desirable to open it now in view of problems that will be caused to cross-border traffic while the works are in progress. Steele repeated that the Secretary of State had been previous in telling us of the re-opening. It had not yet been decided but it seems that the only inhibition remaining is financial. (There is a dispute between the NIO and the Ministry of Defence about financial responsibility.) The British hope to be able to say soon soon what they expect the overall effect will be on cross-border traffic in this area while the Kilturk works are in progress.

8. Other work

The British did tell us some time ago that there would be other refurbishment work around the border. We asked Steele today if any others were in the offing. He said not, but there would be other work and they would tell us as soon as they were able to.

9. Comment

There is a spiral here which has developed faster in recent years. The British say the border areas must have a police presence; they cannot be expected to abandon the areas entirely; nor do they think we would wish that they should; the police need Army protection; the IRA devise better and better means of piercing defences; the British build better and bigger bases; and so it will go on until there is a cessation of violence.

10. It is for judgement on our side as to whether we should claim credit for the re-opening of Clonatty Bridge, when and if it occurs; we should bear in mind that local reaction may not be welcoming since it will be associated with other restrictive measures.

X J 11. Although Steele did not stress it on this occasion, it goes without saying that the British are fearful of casualties during this operation and that today's information has been provided in strict confidence.