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17 December 1997 **No of pages including this one: 3**

To: HQ **From: Belfast**
For: Secretary Gallagher **From: Joint Secretary**

Subj: Conversation with the GOC

1. I had a conversation with Sir Rupert Smith, the GOC of the British Army in Northern Ireland, at a social function earlier this week.

2. I pressed Smith on a number of aspects of the de-escalation agenda, in particular troop withdrawals and the dismantling of security installations in South Armagh.

3. His general response was that he had no difficulty in principle with a scaling-down of the Army's presence in Northern Ireland in response to the continuing ceasefires. He commented, however, that, following the recent decisions on the withdrawal of one battalion, the ending of Army foot patrols in Belfast and other matters, he was "running out of major options" in terms of what he could do in the short term.

4. Smith also referred to the uncertainties about the current ceasefires and the threats posed by the CAC, LVF etc. He expressed particular anxiety about the possibility of sectarian tension rising both in the run-up to next year's marching season and as the talks process approached its finale. He did not wish the Army's capacity to be significantly reduced in these circumstances.

5. Smith was anxious to draw a distinction between decisions of a relatively straightforward operational nature, which fell within his own remit, and those of a more strategic and longer-term nature, affecting the future of the British Army as a whole, which would require political authorisation at the highest levels in London.

6. What this seems to mean in practice is that Smith would be able (subject to routine consultation with the MOD, the RUC and the Secretary of State) to withdraw over

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time the remaining "roulement" battalions under his command in Northern Ireland. He described these battalions, which carry out six-monthly tours of duty on transfer from garrisons in Britain and elsewhere, as the mainstay of the Army presence here. As they have no permanent base in Northern Ireland, they are highly flexible in terms of deployment and are, as a consequence, the hardest-worked units. There are at present five "roulement" battalions in different parts of the North (two in the Belfast area, Fermanagh, East Tyrone and South Armagh).

7. Smith suggested that, in the event of a stable political settlement being reached next summer, and of the marching season passing off without serious incident, it would be possible for him to arrange for the non-replacement of each "roulement" battalion as its turn arose. This would, in practical terms, reduce the Army's overall strength by some 2,500 (approximately five hundred per battalion), followed by support staff in each instance.

8. What Smith was more wary about, however, was making inroads into the Army's permanent establishment here. He observed that no accommodation facilities existed for these units anywhere else and it would be for the Army's political masters to take the hard decisions about redeployment, redundancies, closure of bases etc. One of the options, he remarked in passing, would be to reduce, or remove altogether, the part-time element in the Royal Irish Regiment.

9. In contrast to other senior British Army figures with whom we have discussed these issues in the past, Smith is noticeably more cautious about more radical steps which could be taken to reduce the Army presence here. Although his predecessor and other Army people were willing during the last ceasefire to contemplate a fairly rapid reduction to a basic "garrison" of 6,000-7,000 (in other words, to pre-1969 levels), the present GOC did not wish to be drawn into any speculation of this kind. Citing the February 1996 breakdown as the reason for his caution, as well as ongoing uncertainty about the current ceasefires, he insisted on the need for "adequate" Army strength to be maintained in order to cater for all contingencies.

10. Finally, on the question of military installations in South Armagh, Smith recognised that "something will have to be done" but again claimed that it would be logistically difficult in the short term to find alternative accommodation for the personnel concerned and suggested that action on this front could only take place over a longer time scale.

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11. I emphasised to him the serious political difficulties posed by the continued operation of these bases in the new circumstances created by the IRA ceasefire (including the problem of low-flying helicopters) and I urged him to consider what steps he could take in the short term to defuse tensions over this. Smith undertook to reflect on these points and to respond to them when he comes for dinner here shortly.

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