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Pl cc Section
ccd 27/3

FOR: MARY BROWNE/EMBASSY, LONDON **FROM**: K. DOWLING

DATE: 27 MARCH 1997 **PAGES**:

Comments by Jim Canning about the Coalisland explosion, 27 March 1997

Interviewer: A 19 year old man is in a serious but stable condition in hospital tonight after being shot during an incident in the centre of Coalisland in Co Tyrone. Local people say the shooting happened after an explosion near the local police station. The RUC said there was an attack but haven't given any details of the nature of it. A local independent Counsellor Jim Canning who was at a function in the town described what happened.

Canning: A number of us went out and there was a young man lying on the footpath just below the Mill and what appeared to be some form of an undercover officer with a gun beside him tying his hands behind his back. There were a number of cars arrived, unmarked cars and a number of people got out apparently again undercover soldiers of some kind. They were in plain clothes and were wearing hats with white markings on them. They started to shout at the crowd to go back and eventually there were plastic baton rounds fired. The crowd moved back. There was an ambulance called and took the man away, he appeared to be wounded.

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File

PST, PSS
S/S Ó hUiginn
Counsellors A-I Section
Messrs. Teahon, Donlon & Dalton
Ambassadors London & Washington
~~Joint Secretary~~

Security Sec
Box ccd 27/3

Secure Fax: 297

27 March 1997

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To: HQ
For: Colm O Floinn

From: Belfast
From: Kieran Dowling

Subj: Coalisland shooting

1. We got an oral report from the NIO duty officer at c. 11.45pm last night and a further call just after midnight on the matter.

2. In the first conversation the duty officer indicated that the information available to her from the RUC was that there had been a mortar attack against the RUC station in Coalisland at approximately 9.35pm and that one of the attackers had been shot and was critically ill in hospital. It was thought that the sangar in front of the RUC station had been hit.

3. In the second conversation, she clarified that it had not been a mortar attack but rather that a device, possibly a hand grenade or a coffee jar bomb had been thrown against the station. No damage had been done.

4. The man who had been shot was seriously ill but stable in the South Tyrone/Dungannon hospital.

5. As to whether he had been shot by the security forces, the duty officer said that this would seem to be the case, but had not been confirmed.

6. An elderly woman (a passerby) was also being treated for shock (note: radio reports suggested that a second woman also was being treated).

7. The duty officer further indicated that there had been an Arts Festival across the road from the RUC station. Following the shooting, a crowd gathered and PBRs had been fired but no injuries had resulted. The crowd had then dispersed.

8. **Comment:** We are seeking further information from the British side here on the

NB: Spoke to Kieran Dowling re "Morning Ireland" report this a.m. Matter is being pursued in Belfast

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shooting, including on the basis of the Irish News report of this morning ("'SAS soldiers' shoot man in Coalisland") and Jim Canning's account of the incident as carried in that article - and also covered on BBC Radio Ulster late last night.

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Secure Fax: 298

27 March 1997 **No of pages including this one: 2**

To: HQ **From: Belfast**
For: C. O Floinn **From: K. Dowling**

Subj: Coalisland shooting (ii)

1. The sitrep report of the above incident, as just received, reads as follows:

Coalisland 2136 hrs/Wednesday 26 March

"A man was shot by security forces following an explosion in vicinity of RUC Coalisland.

Precise circumstances as yet unclear. Police confirm that 2 men were seen entering an alleyway near RUC Coalisland. An explosion was heard and shortly thereafter the same 2 men emerged from the alleyway. Their reactions to being challenged by Army personnel resulted in one of them being shot - he is currently seriously ill but stable in South Tyrone hospital, Dungannon. A crowd which quickly appeared after the incident was dispersed by as yet unconfirmed firecrackers or PBRs being fired. No injuries as a result. A woman passing by was also taken to hospital suffering from shock.

In a follow-up operation, two further arrests were made.

Security forces are currently carrying out a through search of the area to identify the cause of the explosion. So far, some marks on the rear of the wall of the station have been found which would not be inconsistent with an attempted mortar attack. But cause of explosion is as yet unknown.

A full investigation of the incident is ongoing".

2. We have spoken to the British side (Peter Bell) who in turn was in touch earlier this morning with Tom Clarke of SPOB.

3. Bell said that SPOB had very few facts to go on and he was not surprised therefore at the inconsistency between the first report last night in which it had been suggested to us that a mortar attack against the RUC station had been in question. The second oral account, as indicated, suggested rather that some sort of device (grenade or coffee jar bomb) might have been used.

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4. Bell said that all he could say was that there had been an explosion at the back of the RUC station but that it was not known what had caused this. The explosion had not caused much damage. Secondly, someone had been shot in the vicinity of the explosion, but that the circumstances were unclear. Thirdly, some kind of "affray" had developed following the incident and "shots of some kind" had been fired to disperse the crowd which had gathered.

5. SPOB had however made very clear that the reports from the police indicated that a serious terrorist incident had been frustrated by the actions of the security forces in this case.

6. He could also say with certainty that there will be a police investigation into the matter (he could not say at this stage whether this will be under ICPC supervision).

Note: Joint Secretary further reports that an RUC statement may issue this morning.

Discrepancies in accounts of this incident to date are being vigorously pursued in Secretariat, including joints at X

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M. cc PSS

Confidential

Coalisland - Conversation with Jim Canning, 27 March 1997

Further to the incident which occurred last night in Coalisland, I spoke with Jim Canning who provided the following account.

Sequence of Events

1. Canning was attending the opening of an arts exhibition close to the RUC station. At about 9.40 pm, he hear a bang followed some 30 seconds later by shots. He and others went into the street to investigate.

2. Four to five cars suddenly converged from different directions and about 8 individuals emerged (there was also mention of a red van). They were in plain clothes but all were wearing similar caps which appeared to have a white florescent marking. They were in a heightened state and very aggressive.

3. Canning saw a man lying face down on the ground. One of the plainclothes individuals was hovering over him with a pointed pistol. He turned the man over, appeared to search him and turn him face down again. A young woman made her way through the crowd and was described as the man's sister. The injured man called out "Angela" and she went to speak to him. Canning said the man appeared to be wearing red gloves but it might also have been blood.

4. While the crowd of some 50-60 people milled about, the "undercover" agents, as Canning put it, yelled abuse and threats at the crowd to stay back. Canning said something was fired but was not sure what. All he could say was that there were flashes, sparks and bangs. The crowd moved back. An ambulance arrived for the injured man and shortly afterwards the undercover agents left.

5. Canning also reported that a local curate, Fr. Rice, was driving by when the initial incident occurred but drove on at speed when his rear window was smashed, possibly by a bullet. (I hope to speak to Fr. Rice about this today.)

Private views of RUC and NIO

6. Canning spoke confidentially to a local RUC officer with whom he has a good relationship. The officer said that they were unaware of any impending attack and were not aware that any attack on the station had in fact occurred.

7. In speaking to the NIO, an official there suggested to Canning that an imminent attack had been thwarted by the security forces.

8. The incident will inevitably sour relations with the security forces locally, despite the good record of recent months. The Army dug in (foxhole and sandbags) at the edge of the local enterprise centre somtime this morning. This has added to the general air of tension.

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Canning's Assessment

9. He had no view of whether or not an attack in progress. But he believed that the security forces present had completely over reacted. There is a lot of local anger at the incident. Even very moderate people are outraged. "The Shinners couldn't have written a better script themselves", he said, "They're rubbing their hands in glee." He had heard that Martin McGuinness had arrived in Coalisland this morning.

10. Canning recommended that a full and genuine explanation should be released as quickly as possible. However, he had no expectation of this and anticipated evasion and dissembling from the authorities which would only deepen the sense of local outrage.

Eamonn McKee
Security Section
27 March 1997

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Counsellors A-I Section
Messers. Teahon, Donlon, Dalton
Ambassadors London & Washington
Joint Secretary ✓

cc'd CB
27/5.

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cc Second Secretary
Security Section
27/3

Report Number: M. 700

Transmitted on: RTE Radio 1 - Morning Ireland

Date: 27 March 1997

Time: 8am

Short Title:

News Extracts

7 Ely Place, Dublin 2.
Telephone: 01-661 6900
Facsimile: 01-661 5401

M. cc Security Section 27/3

Richard Crowley:

A 19 year old local man is in a serious but stable condition in hospital after being shot in Coalisland in County Tyrone last night in what local people are claiming was an undercover security force operation. The incident followed an explosion close to the town's RUC station shortly before ten o'clock. Local independent Councillor, Jim Canning, was nearby when the explosion occurred, he's on the line now. Good morning Mr. Canning.

Cllr. Jim Canning: (Independent)

Good morning.

Richard Crowley:

What did you hear, what did you see?

Cllr. Jim Canning:

Well I was attending an arts and crafts exhibition in the Corn Mill which is just across the road from the police station and about twenty minutes to ten there was an explosion and this was followed shortly afterwards by a number of gunshots. A number of us went out onto the street and there was a young man lying on the footpath just below the mill with an armed man holding a gun towards his head and tying his hands behind his back. There were a number of cars arrived very quickly on the scene and the men jumped out, again in plain clothes, with hats with white marks on them, and all fairly heavily armed. They started shouting at the crowd to get back and it was a very agitated and upsetting scene.

Richard Crowley:

What was the crowd's reaction?

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Cllr. Jim Canning:

The crowd's reaction, I heard people shouting that it was a stun grenade that was fired at the young man and they were surging forward and shouting at these undercover soldiers and then they were, there were plastic baton rounds or some form of grenades fired, there were a lot of explosions happening and the crowd moved back again.

Richard Crowley:

Fired in the air or fired at the crowd?

Cllr. Jim Canning:

Fired into the ground, there were flashes on the ground.

Richard Crowley:

What caused the explosion?

Cllr. Jim Canning:

We don't know what caused the explosion, it would appear to have been some form of undercover security operation gone wrong, the attitude in the town last night was that this was an undercover unit that had overreacted to something that was happening.

Richard Crowley:

And it was their explosives, it wasn't an attack on the RUC station or an attempted attack?

Cllr. Jim Canning:

Well that would appear to be it, the police are certainly not saying that the police station were attacked, I think that is a very question at the moment.

Richard Crowley:

We're joined on the line now by Ulster Unionist MP, Ken Maginnis. Ken Maginnis, what are your sources telling you?

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Ken Maginnis: (Ulster Unionist Party)

Well I'm afraid I have no information whatsoever about the actual incident, at least none that are more than hearsay. I am surprised actually at what I've heard from Jim Canning, he may be right, he may be wrong, but I'm not in a position to make a judgement at this particular moment.

Richard Crowley:

However, you do see it as something of a serious escalation of the situation?

Ken Maginnis:

Very much so, it's serious insofar as if it was a terrorist incident it appears that we are likely to have more of these between now and the election, we've had the incident in the, the Cheshire in England the previous night so I still would be of the opinion, I may be wrong and I don't want to make a definitive judgement, I still would be of the opinion that this was meant to be another comparatively low level attack by terrorists, as was the one in England, intended to prove to the electorate that the IRA hasn't gone away rather than anything else, it wouldn't be in their interest, one can never be absolute certain, but it wouldn't be in their interest at this stage to have a major Warrington or Enniskillen type affair and for that reason I believe that tactically they will resort only to the sort of lower level attacks that will bring them the sort of publicity that indeed we're providing at the moment.

Richard Crowley:

And the suggestion also is that not alone does it send a certain message to the electorate coming up to an election but that it pacifies if you like the hard-liners within the IRA and avoids a split, that's to be welcomed.

Ken Maginnis:

Well I think, well not from my point of view, I would like to see the terrorist, all terrorist organisations split asunder but the.....

Richard Crowley:

You know the consequences of a split means that you simply have to negotiate with somebody else.

Ken Maginnis:

No that's rather naïve, the fact is that it is the unity within terrorist organisations that provides the strength as with any other political or pseudo-political organisation. The reality is of

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course that these activities may in fact be a lead up to a declaration of another tactical and bogus ceasefire a few days before the election. I know the IRA have said they won't have a ceasefire before the election but if they intend to have one afterwards in order to try to put pressure on the new administration then it may be that they see some benefits from having it a few days earlier in order to be able to say to people, as they did before, it won't be true but in order to be able to say to people a vote for Sinn Fein is a vote for peace.

Richard Crowley:

Ken Maginnis, thank you for joining us. That's the Ulster Unionist MP and also before that we were talking to Independent Councillor, Jim Canning, on the line there from Coalisland in County Tyrone.

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