

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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PS1; PS2; Messrs. Teahon, Donlon & Dalton; Ambassadors London & Washington; Joint Secretary; Counsellors A-I

Secure Fax: 373

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

To: HQ **From: Belfast**
For: Second Secretary O hUiginn **From: Joint Secretary**

pa UDA
cc UVF
cc S.2.

Subj: British assessment of North Belfast disturbances

1. We have had a number of conversations with the British side about the disturbances in the Limestone Road area of North Belfast last weekend. We sought their assessment of what may have given rise to these disturbances and of the extent to which Loyalist paramilitary feuding may have been a factor.

2. This assessment has now been received. The British view, based on intelligence reports and police input, is that UDA/UVF feuding is indeed a source of considerable tension and instability in the area. However, last weekend's disturbances were not directly triggered by this but were caused by the standard onset of inter-communal tension around this time of year along the increasingly contested interface in North Belfast.

3. There has been bitter feuding for many years now between the UDA and the UVF in two parts of North and West Belfast. In the Shore Road area, the UVF have challenged the UDA and have generally had the upper hand. In Ballysillan, on the other hand, the UDA are in control. The issues, which frequently involve racketeering (though not drug trafficking) and also include a number of personal animosities, come down essentially to a struggle for territorial control. This spills over into sectarian attacks across the interface from time to time, as one or other group tries to assert Loyalist supremacy in areas where nationalists are perceived to be encroaching. There have also been clashes with the RUC, including an incident some weeks ago in which two policemen were injured and a car damaged.

4. The assessment of last weekend's disturbances, however, is that the UDA/UVF dimension was less important than some media reports have suggested. Certainly, there is no suggestion that either paramilitary organisation instigated, or coordinated,

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the violence. Emphasis is laid instead on the contribution made by a group of young Loyalist "layabouts" who, having left the pubs last Saturday night, lingered in the Limestone Road area and taunted a number of Catholic youths who were assembled about 100 yards away near Newington Avenue. While the latter are not exonerated entirely, the British view is that Loyalist provocation caused the trouble in the first instance. The Limestone Road/Halliday's Road area is claimed as Loyalist territory whereas the nearby Newington Avenue area is solidly nationalist. Our British interlocutors do not exclude the possibility that some of the Loyalists involved in the trouble were members of the UDA or UVF. On balance, however, they tend to regard the problem as one of "straightforward hooliganism"

5. They make the general point that, with improving weather and longer summer evenings, more people tend to hang around on the streets after closing time and look for trouble. There are also territorial disputes relating to the pubs themselves. Friction of this kind is commonplace around this time of year and is likely to become more pronounced as the marching season approaches.

6. The British side recognise that the Catholic families who suffered intimidation last Saturday night (arising from the location of their flats between the two rival groups of youths), and who were forced to leave their homes, were totally innocent bystanders. They attach no credence, furthermore, to suggestions in the Newsletter that Catholic families are opportunistically moving into areas with a high risk of disturbance in the hope that they might go to the top of Housing Executive waiting-lists if they are forced out of their homes.

7. We have emphasised the need for a more permanent and visible RUC presence in the Limestone Road area, with regular vehicle patrolling, in order to protect nationalists living near the interface from marauding Loyalists. We have also complained about the RUC's slow response to the developing trouble last weekend.

8. The response has been that it is not feasible in practical terms, or safe from the RUC's point of view, to station policemen permanently in troublesome parts of North Belfast. They accept, however, that action must be taken to improve RUC response rates. We will be taking up directly with John Steele next week the points made in para 6 of Mr McKee's very helpful report on the North Belfast situation.

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9 Recalling the erection of barriers at Mountcollyer Street last year to reduce the scope for conflict along that interface, the British side have observed that, as Limestone Road is a main artery, no such action could be undertaken there.

10. In general terms, they tend to take a fatalistic view of what can be done to prevent sectarian confrontation and violence in an area such as the North Belfast interface, where both communities live virtually on top of each other and in conditions of long-term urban deprivation. The slightest apparent encroachment by one community onto the territory of the other is perceived as a provocation calling for immediate retaliation. (My British opposite number compares the problem to that of the "debatable lands" between England and Scotland in the 18th century).

11. Finally, as a codicil on Loyalist paramilitary intentions, we understand that the advice fed to the NIO by senior RUC officers this week is that the CLMC are holding firmly to their ceasefire and that matters will not deteriorate beyond the so-called "measured responses" to individual IRA attacks. In the latter respect, some encouragement is taken from the fact that the shooting of Constable Collins a week ago today has not yet been avenged.

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