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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH
BÉAL FEIRSTE

ANGLO-IRISH SECRETARIAT
BELFAST

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TO: Colm Ó Floinn
Anglo-Irish Division

FROM: Val O'Donnell

Re: Removal of Troops from Belfast Streets

Further to Joint Secretary's earlier report SF 1056, I enclose a full transcript of the remarks made by the Chief Constable today in connection with the above announcement, which I have received from Chief Superintendent Gerry Sillery.

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CHIEF CONSTABLE, MR RONNIE FLANAGAN, LAUNCHES ANNUAL REPORT 1997

THURSDAY, 10 SEPTEMBER 1998

CHIEF CONSTABLE

Can I first of all apologise for the delay that you've been subjected to this morning. You will understand it's at the request of some of your own colleagues who had other earlier business to attend to. And can I welcome you to the public launch of my Annual Report for 1997. You will know Mr Colin Cramphorn, my Deputy Chief Constable; and some of you may not know Mr Albison, my Assistant Chief Constable in charge of Management Support Department.

In launching this report for 1997 I would primarily like to pay tribute, first of all of course to all my officers, four of whom were murdered during that year in providing the policing service to the people of Northern Ireland. But also to the Police Authority for Northern Ireland; to my own Staff Associations; to the Government; and primarily to the people of Northern Ireland for their support in what was quite a difficult year. You may wonder why it is only in September that the Report for the previous year is being launched. And that's explained by virtue of the fact that this year we're moving to an annual reporting basis from a calendar year to a fiscal year; so henceforth annual reports will cover the fiscal year; and you will see statistics in the Report that indicate that during 1997 overall levels of reported crime fell by almost 10%; and crime in most categories also fell. Our detection rate stood very favourably at just over 30%. All of this was achieved against a very difficult background of continuing public disorder problems and indeed during 1997 of continuing problems of terrorism. And I pay the warmest of tributes to all those whom I have mentioned for allowing us as an organisation to have fared so well in my view, in the face of those extreme difficulties.

I'd now be quite happy to take any questions you might like to ask.

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Question — Chief Constable, I know this Report looks back on 1997 but can we look forward a bit? There has been a lot of speculation in the papers since the weekend of some sort of trade-off between demilitarisation and decommissioning. What's your view on that? How accurate are those reports?

Chief Constable — I can tell you that there will be no such trade-off. I am operationally independent; I am provided with tremendous assistance by my military colleagues through the General Officer Commanding; and the General Officer Commanding and I continuously review the need for such things as levels of military support. **Now I can tell you, for example, that after this weekend we will be reverting to a position where there will be no military patrolling in the Greater Belfast area.** Now that's a very welcome development and it's made possible by the fact that we are currently in a period of very significantly reduced terrorist threat. It's because of that very significantly reduced terrorist threat that we are able to make these changes and engage in review of all sorts of levels of activity which we currently have to deploy. So it's all completely dependent on the threat; and there can be no trade-off, it has to relate to the threat that exists. I have a duty of care to protect the people against a threat, and in exercising that duty of care, that will bring about necessary levels of police deployment and in some areas necessary levels of military accompaniment of that police deployment.

Question — I know you've always said that decommissioning is a political issue, but do you have anything to suggest that the IRA is any closer, or any nearer, to the point where they would consider decommissioning?

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Chief Constable I'm not going to get into decommissioning because as you quite rightly say, decommissioning is in the political arena. I have a very clear job, a very clear task, and that's to do all that I can to determine where guns and explosives are being unlawfully held; and thereafter to do all that I can to seize such unlawfully held guns and explosives and to bring to justice those who are unlawfully holding such material. Now decommissioning is an entirely different issue, firmly in the political arena, and that's where it must stay.

Question How many troops would be freed by your decision, from the weekend?

Chief Constable I'm not going to get into the exact question of troop levels, but clearly if the tasks that I'm providing for military colleagues are reducing that will ultimately have an impact on the number of troops that we need to have in the Province, that we need to deploy on the ground; that's something we have very actively under review at the moment, but I'm not going to get into the nitty-gritty of the details of numbers of troops that are involved.

Question Would a battalion be based in Belfast, Whiterock used to be an Army base in the city. Would there be as much as a battalion there?

Chief Constable I'm not going to say exactly where battalions and what strengths are deployed. But if I'm in a position where, after this weekend, I no longer require military patrolling in the Greater Belfast area, that will undoubtedly have an impact on troop levels. The exact impact that that will have is something that's currently under very active review by myself and the General Officer Commanding.

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Question — Chief Constable, do you expect that that reduction in military patrolling will in time spread to country areas. Within the nationalist community there is an expectation that, there's just one paramilitary grouping now not on ceasefire, that there should be a reduction in the watch towers and border patrolling, this type of thing. Can you say that that will happen in time?

Chief Constable — We want to get to a position and we want to get to it as quickly as possible where there is no need for any military patrolling. And quite frankly nobody wants that more than my military colleagues want it. And I'm certain that that's what all the people of Northern Ireland would want. But we have to continually assess the threat that the people of Northern Ireland face; and that threat varies from area to area. So for the time being there are areas where our military colleagues must continue to be deployed. I hope we move very quickly to a position that what I'm currently able to do in Belfast I will be able to in other areas of the Province. You have to consider for example that there is no military patrolling in the City of Derry either and there is very significantly reduced patrolling right across the Province. We want to see that reduction increasing in its pace and increasing in its scale, because that will indicate the confidence that we have in terms of the threat currently posed.

Question — Chief Constable, Unionists have been demanding a statement recently that the war is over and Gerry Adams came up with a form of words last week. What is your assessment of the terrorist organisations, is the war over or are they still active in the background?

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Chief Constable I have to say that so far as the statement made by Gerry Adams is concerned that if you'd asked me sometime before that, was it significant that they had either failed or refused to make such a statement, I would have said yes, that is significant. And it is worryingly significant. So therefore I can't say other than that the fact such a statement was made is significant. We have currently a very significantly reduced terrorist threat. It doesn't mean in any sense that there is no terrorist threat. We are only some weeks after the worst atrocity that's been afflicted on the people of Northern Ireland and I needn't go in here into the details of the Omagh atrocity; that was a very short time ago. It indicates the capability that these groupings have to carry out such atrocities and we must protect the people of Northern Ireland against the likelihood, against the possibility, against the capability of others to carry out such attacks.

Question What is your assessment of the announcement from the so-called Real IRA, is that non-political and a complete ceasefire, or is it something you believe that they have been forced into and that they could at some stage in the future return to that type of activity they were involved in up to a couple of weeks ago?

Chief Constable When you use the word "could" they return at some stage, well I use the word "capability" and it's a capability that we have to guard against on behalf of the people. So at this stage yes, they could return, but equally at this stage it has to be seen as a very positive development. People shouldn't get necessarily tremendous kudos for stopping what they should never have done in the first place; there never was any justification for the violence that has been inflicted on the people of Northern

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Ireland and there certainly is no justification for it now. I think what everyone of influence must do is to exercise that influence positively so that the position we're currently in - a very significantly reduced threat - becomes a position of absence of threat and becomes a position of permanent absence of threat.

Question — Chief Constable, next Saturday will be a month from the Omagh bombing. Can you tell us anything about how that inquiry is going or how close the Force is to securing arrests and convictions?

Chief Constable — If I say the investigation is progressing very satisfactorily I want it to be absolutely clear that none of us will ever be satisfied until the people who carried out that act are before the courts. We're pursuing a number of very definite lines of enquiry; we're pursuing those lines of enquiry very actively. I have had the most tremendous assistance from colleagues in the London Metropolitan Police Service and particular assistance on an ongoing basis from my colleagues in the Garda Siochana. I'm convinced that the lines of enquiry we're pursuing will lead us to the people who carried out that atrocity and will enable us to bring those people in time before a court.

Question — Away from the whole security situation, are there any issues within Northern Ireland, perhaps drugs, crime, drink-driving, traffic, are there any areas that continue to worry the RUC or are there any areas that you're proud of your achievement in the past year?

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Chief Constable I'm proud of what my officers have achieved in all their areas of activity. I think the people of Northern Ireland should ask themselves: where would we have been over the past number of years without the Royal Ulster Constabulary? Where would we be now without them? So of course I'm proud of their achievement. But all of the areas that you mention are areas of concern. There is a growing drug problem; there are far too many people killed on our roads. We're about to launch another phase of our Operation Roadsafe. We're directing that particularly at the wearing of seat belts. Up to this point this year five more people have been killed on our roads than were killed during the same period last year. It's an area where we together, the police and the public whom the police exist to service, can do much more to eradicate these deaths. So all of the areas that you mention are areas of concern for us, as are all the quality of life issues that affect people in the everyday conduct of their business. For policing to be truly effective it has to involve working collaborative partnerships between the police and the people they exist to serve. That's what I'm determined to foster and enhance.

Question Was the incident this morning which we heard about the arrest of a number of men in west Belfast, is that related to a paramilitary organisation?

Chief Constable It is related to a paramilitary organisation and it is in pursuit of an investigation, a complaint made to us by an individual who was abducted, by his version of events. He has given us certain evidence in relation to that and we're pursuing that investigation, which has led us to arrest a number of people and conduct a number of searches.

Question Is that republican paramilitary organisation?

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Chief Constable That's correct.

Question Is there evidence, Chief Constable, that more Catholics and people from the nationalist community are trying to apply to join the RUC?

Chief Constable There is some evidence but not enough evidence. You will be aware that a Select Committee of the House of Commons has recently looked at exactly that issue, together with the issue of under-representation of women in our organisation. They've made a number of recommendations, as has a Working Group which I created involving members of the Police Authority, senior officers of mine, and indeed members of the public. We're currently very actively pursuing those recommendations. I hope that pursuit of those recommendations plus an increasingly safe environment in respect of those young Catholic men and women who would want to come forward and offer themselves for a police career, will bring about the effect of much more people in that community coming forward to offer themselves. I think there are opinion-formers in the Catholic community who can do much more to encourage people and foster the notion that this is an honourable profession for anyone to pursue. We're making progress but we're not making progress but we're not making progress quickly enough; I want to see still greater progress made in that area.

Question Chief Constable, in relation to what happened in Portadown last week, I think both yourself and Tom Craig described it as orchestrated, organised loyalist violence. Can you be any more specific than that? Do you know which organisation, which paramilitary organisations, are behind that activity last weekend?

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Chief Constable It would be wrong to suggest any single paramilitary organisation was behind or is behind what's going on in Portadown at the moment. There are a collection of individuals whom we suspect as being involved in that orchestration; an orchestration it was because five crates of petrol bombs aren't spontaneously produced; the makings of a further five crates of petrol bombs which we also seized, aren't spontaneously produced; blast bombs which critically injured our colleagues are not spontaneously produced. That violence was orchestrated; we have made a number of arrests in connection with that violence; we are interviewing people in that regard and we're determined that the people of Portadown will not be subjected to that ongoing violence that we've witnessed over the past weeks.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I think that concludes this morning's press release. Thanks very much indeed for your attendance.

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