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Date:	**22 September 1998**	**No. of pages including cover: 5**	
For:	**HQ**	**From:**	**Belfast**
For:	**Secretary Gallagher**	**From:**	**Joint Secretary**

Subj: Conversation with the Chief Constable

1. I had a conversation with Ronnie Flanagan, the Chief Constable, at a Hillsborough reception last evening.

2. The following points of interest arose.

Ending of Army patrols

3. Welcoming the recent decision to end Army patrols in the Greater Belfast area (which followed an earlier decision in relation to Derry), I asked what could be done to accelerate the withdrawal of Army patrols from other parts of Northern Ireland.

4. Flanagan said that he is currently winding down Army patrols in South Derry and other areas. The decision in relation to Greater Belfast, he went on to observe, takes in much of Antrim.

5. As regards Fermanagh, there are problems related to the continuing threat from the Continuity IRA, which the RUC and the Garda Síochana are working actively to combat. This means that it will not be possible to make significant reductions in the level of Army patrolling there, at least in the short term. Similar concerns about CIRA activity restrict the options in relation to Mid-Ulster and South Armagh for the moment.

6. Flanagan intends, however, to propose to the Secretary of State that a statement would

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issue in the near future drawing attention to the removal/reduction of Army patrols in South Derry and other parts of Northern Ireland outside Derry and Belfast. I strongly encouraged him in this respect. He warned, however, that he could not be seen to be working to an overt political agenda involving decommissioning for de-escalation, although he recognised that "nobody is working in a vacuum and there is always a wider political context".

Withdrawal of troops

7. Flanagan told me that there would be an announcement today regarding the withdrawal of two Army battalions from Northern Ireland. (Note: This has been confirmed by the British side this morning and a draft press release for the Secretary of State has been forwarded; a total of 250-275 soldiers are involved, this will mean the completion, by 3 October, of the withdrawal of two full roulement battalions over recent months).

8. The background to this development, Flanagan told me, is that Army strength is expected to become surplus to requirements over the coming months for three reasons in particular:

- the ending of Army patrols in the Greater Belfast area;
- the diminishing need for a Maze garrison (as the GOC indicated to me in a recent conversation);
- adjustments which are possible following the closure of some smaller installations (in Fermanagh and elsewhere).

9. Flanagan expected that there would be more announcements about troop withdrawals in the near future.

De-escalation in South Armagh

10. He mentioned to me, in strict confidence, an idea he has for the replacement of

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helicopter transport of personnel and equipment to RUC/Army bases in South Armagh with road transport. You will recall that a measure of this kind was introduced several months ago in relation to the Crossmaglen base specifically. Introducing it on a more general basis, which Flanagan considers feasible in the changed circumstances, would mean a very significant reduction in the level of helicopter activity in South Armagh.

11. I said that, while dismantling of the bases themselves should remain the key priority, the ending of helicopter overflights would be a valuable gesture in itself and it would be helpful if this could happen sooner rather than later.

Portadown

12. Flanagan gave a fairly downbeat assessment of the prospects for a resolution of the Portadown problem.

13. He had just come from a meeting with the DUP and the local Orangemen (Gracey, Jones, Watson and others). They were insisting, predictably enough, that the crisis could only be resolved if a parade were allowed down the Garvaghy Road this year. Flanagan told them that that was a matter for the Parades Commission, not the RUC. His guests refused to recognise any role for the Commission.

14. Flanagan sees Gracey and Jones as the nub of the problem. Senior figures in the Orange Order hierarchy have privately tried to get these two to move but with a complete lack of success so far. Flanagan was particularly vitriolic about Jones, whom he has been close to suing for libel arising from remarks (only partially reported by the media) to the effect that the RUC had advance knowledge of the murder of the Quinn brothers in Ballymoney.

15. By his own account of yesterday's meeting, Flanagan told Gracey and his companions that the stance they have been taking in Portadown is untenable. Their insistence that the town will not be allowed to return to normal until they have had their parade is tantamount to blackmail.

16. Flanagan hopes that the residents, who have won an important moral victory this year,

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may find it possible on this basis to be more accommodating towards the Orangemen next year. However, his sense is that the recent violence in Portadown (of which, of course, the 30-year-old Constable O'Reilly, who has suffered serious brain damage, is the most serious casualty) has greatly reduced the willingness of the residents to contemplate a deal with the Orangemen.

17. Noting that last Saturday's protest was kept under control only because of a heavy RUC presence, he expressed concern to me about the resource implications of providing similar saturation cover on a weekly basis until a solution was found.

18. While he is broadly sympathetic to the current efforts to produce a settlement with the aid of a Civic Forum and material support for Portadown, he is not particularly optimistic about success on this front. He is also uneasy about the implications of the British Government going to the lengths of setting up the Parades Commission, and equipping it with powers to determine parade routes, yet appearing to marginalise it when it comes to finding a solution for Portadown. He would ideally like to see a local accommodation which is mediated by the Commission, not the British Government.

Policing Commission

19. We had a general discussion of the work of the Policing Commission. I emphasised our hopes that the Commission will approach its task in a serious and imaginative way and that the result will be far-reaching reform of the RUC which will inspire widespread confidence in the nationalist community and help to consolidate the Agreement.

20. Flanagan made clear that he recognises the key importance of policing reform for the credibility and success of the Agreement. He did not disguise, however, a degree of apprehension about what the Commission might propose and referred to the problems of managing morale among his own rank-and-file as its work proceeds.

21. Reflecting on the meeting which he had just had with the DUP, he wondered to what extent Assembly members might seek to influence the decisions reached by the British Government on foot of the Commission's recommendations. (Comment:

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It may be presumed that Flanagan would not object to UUP/DUP assistance in resisting some of the more radical proposals which the Commission may make). He expected that there would be a lively debate on the Commission's report in the relevant Assembly Committee. He suggested that the Assembly might also be in a position to exercise some indirect leverage via the input which it would have to overall budgetary allocations to Northern Ireland (including the law and order budget).

22. Flanagan regarded it as desirable in principle, if the necessary consensus could be achieved, that responsibility for security and law and order should one day be transferred to the Assembly. However, arrangements would be needed to protect the RUC in that situation from direct political interference. He suggested that a "new and improved" Police Authority, with a significant Assembly input and much broader representation from both communities, would be one way of providing democratic scrutiny of a reformed RUC.

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