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Meeting with David Watkins and Susan Scholefield of the NIO on security-related matters and specifically on the Drumcree situation

Belfast Secretariat, Wednesday 28 June 2000

Present at the meeting:

Irish Side

Joint Secretary

Mr. Val O'Donnell (Secretariat)

Mr. Niall Holohan (Secretariat)

Mr. Fergal Mythen (DFA)

Mr. George Hegarty (Secretariat)

British Side

Mr. David Watkins (NIO)

Ms. Susan Scholefield (NIO)

British Joint Secretary

Mr. John Fisher (Secretariat)

Ms. Janice Wilkinson (Secretariat)

General Overview of Drumcree Situation

1. According to Watkins, marches are expected every day from 2-9 July (each day being assigned to a particular County, intended to show the level of support across Northern Ireland for the Portadown Orangemen). Determinations have not yet been issued by the Parades Commission in relation to most of these. Where the level of preparedness of the security forces is concerned, 5 additional army battalions (over 2,000 men) will have arrived in Northern Ireland by Friday and more will be available if needed. The same security equipment (obstacles, etc.) as that used last year is ready to be deployed and preparations are under way for essentially the same overall security arrangements as last year.

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Timing of Deployment of Obstacles

2. Watkins placed particular emphasis on the need to ensure that there would be no misunderstanding of the intentions of the security forces on the basis of *when* obstacles were actually going to be put in place. The current security assessment is that it will not be necessary or advisable to deploy the material until the middle of next week, possibly on Thursday 6 July. There are a number of reasons for this:

I. The security forces are not expecting the situation following the parade on 2 July and into the first part of next week to be particularly difficult. The belief is that widespread support from outside the immediate area is unlikely to materialise this year. As each night will be 'assigned' to a particular County, last Saturday's low turnout in response to the Portadown LOL's call for support would tend to indicate that the numbers likely to respond next week will not be very high.

II. The security forces do not want to inflame the situation early in the week. So far, intelligence suggests that the UVF and UDA/UFF, as organisations, do not intend to get involved, although the LVF and UDA/UFF maverick Johnny Adair are more volatile and would clearly be intent on taking advantage of the tense situation. In particular, Johnny Adair is highly influential with the West Belfast UDA/UFF and has already indicated an interest in Drumcree this year.

III. There is a possibility of alternative routes being used on at least one night during the week, which would skirt the locations where the obstacles would be placed to deal with the normal parade route.

IV. The need to maintain the momentum of such a large-scale security operation over an extended period this year: the later the full operation starts the longer it can be maintained.

The principle concern of the authorities is that the absence of an early deployment of

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the physical security measures may lead residents to believe that the march is going to be allowed through on Sunday 9 July. We were assured that this would be an erroneous conclusion to draw and Watkins was anxious that the reasons for delaying deployment would be understood clearly. In the event that circumstances were to arise requiring an earlier deployment of the physical/engineering measures, we were assured that this could be done in a matter of hours, as happened last year.

Possibility of Trouble Arising

3. We asked what the security approach would be in the case where the parade itself passed off well on 2 July but a number of Loyalists remained on the hill at Drumcree. Watkins replied that no stand-off was expected on 2 July but that sufficient numbers of police and soldiers would be on hand to deal with any situation that arose. If a stand-off situation were to arise this year, he expects it would not happen until after the 9 July parade. While there was no room for complacency, it was felt that there was no appetite for anything of a very violent nature. It remained possible, however, that a violent incident provoked by either dissident Loyalist or Republican paramilitaries could spark things off at any stage. The British Joint Secretary added that while parades could be a catalyst for trouble, the signs were that the underlying level of tension this year was lower than in the past. The recent delivery of the confidence-building measure by the IRA has further stabilised the situation this year. Of course, he said, a detonator can cause damage of itself, even if the charge to which it is attached is not particularly big.

Regarding Drumcree Sunday on 9 July, Watkins said that if the Parades Commission determination stipulates that dispersal is to take place at 2.30 p.m., as was the case last year (and following the 2 July parade this year), this will require delicate operational decision-making on the part of the police commander on the ground. It is estimated that up to 300 people may decide to remain on the hill and that some "unpleasantness" may arise. The police commander will have to judge how to enforce the determination on the basis of a number of factors, taking account of the risk of inflaming the situation on the ground by "wading in". This could provide an early opportunity for groups such as the

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LVF and UDA/UFF elements to get involved. At the same time, he will have to be conscious of the need not to send the wrong signal to the Nationalist community. There is an awareness of the importance of this point at the top levels of the RUC.

The Joint Secretary agreed with the view that moderate Unionist and even moderate Orange opinion was not keen on confrontation this year and asked what the assessment was of the capability of the Loyalist paramilitaries if trouble developed. Watkins felt that there could be problems, with the use of, for example, acid or cross-bows. However, the security installations should be more than sufficient to deal with this.

Safety of Residents Outside 'Ring of Steel'

4. We raised the issue of the safety of vulnerable Catholic families living in sensitive interface areas in Portadown which are not protected by the 'ring of steel' which is to be deployed next week. This matter had also been raised in Log No. I/51 of 22 June. The streets which have been highlighted by the Garvaghy Road Residents' Committee are Corcrain Mews, Corcrain Gardens, parts of Dungannon Road and Selshion Manor. We also drew particular attention to the situation of families at Craigwell Avenue, raised by Bríd Rodgers in conversation with Fergal Mythen on 23 June. The response of the British side was to downplay somewhat the risks which these families are facing, insisting that the numbers of security personnel in Portadown over the coming period will be sufficient to deal with any problems. We stressed the absolute importance of ensuring that that the law would be upheld and that these people would be adequately protected and not left open to attack.

We also asked what liaison arrangements were being put in place between the police and the residents. Watkins was not aware of the precise detail of such arrangements but assumed that they would be broadly the same as those put in place last year. Monitoring of the situation will be continuous and twice-daily meetings of NIO and security personnel will be held to analyse developments and decide on necessary action. We will be kept up to date with these arrangements.

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State of Currin Initiative

5. Watkins assured us that the Currin process "remains in play". It is not easy, but it was never expected to be easy. SOSNI does not expect to have to intervene in the process. Watkins also made the broader point that the Governments' decision to stand back from the process was appropriate: the prestige of those unwilling to compromise, on both sides, was, according to him, due principally to the access they have enjoyed in the past to the sort of high-ranking people they would not normally have access to. Currin is "keeping things together" and it is quite extraordinary that the Orangemen have continued to talk, despite the fact that no march is likely to result this year from it. This would have been unthinkable a year ago.

In general terms, the Orange Order was in a degree of disarray at the moment, with tensions evident between various elements of the institution. The Joint Secretary contrasted the relatively responsible recent statements by Harold Gracie with the more inflammatory rhetoric of David Jones. According to Watkins, the Order wholly distrusts the NIO and has no contact whatsoever with it. There are some indirect low-key contacts with the Parades Commission, but a refusal to engage with it directly. Engagement would be a "high value card", but they refuse to play it.

Feeling of Residents

6. Fergal Mythen reported on the views of residents at the moment. They are fearful of the threat from the LVF and Johnny Adair, but confident that the right decision will be made on the 9 July parade. There is also concern about the situation of Catholic communities elsewhere. The residents were relieved by the failure of the advertising campaign in local newspapers to drum up much support for last Saturday's rally and see this as a sign of hope. On this point, Watkins expressed surprise at Breandán Mac Cionnaith's decision to draw attention to last Saturday's disappointing (from an Orange perspective) result. He was concerned that this could be seen as triumphalist and might even spur greater numbers to attend events next week. It was an uncharacteristic slip from Mac Cionnaith.

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Wider Issues around the 12th

7. Elsewhere in Northern Ireland, the situation looks relatively stable. Watkins said that there was no sign so far that the security forces would find themselves facing a "war on two fronts". We pointed out that last year's arrangements for the main Belfast Orange parades in Ormeau Park seem to have worked quite well. Watkins agreed. Monitoring arrangements were being put in place by the NIO next week.

The Orange Order itself had, according to Scholefield, been taken entirely taken by surprise by the presence of a UFF colour party at last weekend's Whiterock parade. This was seen as a sign of the Order's loss of influence and general decline recently.

General Points

8. ***Drumcree:*** On Drumcree, the widely held view is that no parade will be allowed down the Garvaghy Road on 9 July. Watkins said that he would be "astonished" if the determination (due on Monday) were different to that made in relation to 2 July. There may be trouble, but it should be containable. As the British Joint Secretary put it, "moderation and toleration are in vogue" at the moment.

Paramilitary Flags: We also raised this issue again at this meeting. Scholefield stated that the 'UVF 1912' flags visible throughout Belfast are not, in fact, illegal, because of the '1912' reference. Watkins repeated the point made by Scholefield in previous meetings that these flags were more related to 'turf wars' between Loyalist paramilitary groups than about the intimidation of Catholics. No commitments on action were made or even suggested.

Finaghy Road South: The Joint Secretary voiced the concerns of Nationalist residents of this area (see Secure Fax 688 of 29 June) regarding the level of sectarian assaults and harassment which they face. The British response remains unchanged from that of 7 June on this matter, which can be taken also as applying to our more recent representations.

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Injury Sustained by Gerry Kelly: The baton of the police officer identified by Gerry Kelly of Sinn Féin as having being responsible for the injury he sustained during last weekend's Whiterock march is being examined forensically. The officer denies the assault. According to Scholefield, Kelly was injured at a time when a volley of stones was being thrown from behind him by Nationalist demonstrators. She did not explicitly claim that he had been struck by one of these stones.

George Hegarty

29 June 2000

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