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AN RÚNAÍOCHT IDIR-RIALTASACH
NA BREATAINE-NA hEIREANN
BÉAL FEIRSTE

BRITISH-IRISH INTERGOVERNMENTAL SECRETARIAT
BELFAST

RECEIVED
30 MAY 2000

Fe Gen Gallchóir
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Confidential

4.33

Dinner with Lt-General Sir Hew Pike, GOC
(25 May 2000)

Mr Kinahan
Mr Griffin
12/6/00

1. The General Officer Commanding Northern Ireland, Lieutenant-General Sir Hew Pike, came to the Secretariat for dinner on 25 May at the invitation of the two Joint Secretaries. He was accompanied by his military attaché Lt-Col James Plastow and his civilian secretary, Mr Ian Hamill. Also present were Val O'Donnell, George Hegarty and the undersigned from the Irish side and John Fisher from the British side.

2. The **Irish Joint Secretary** welcomed the GOC and recalled that, while many terrible things had occurred since then, the British Army had come to Northern Ireland in August 1969 to protect the local people and to attempt to assist in holding the ring as local political leaders sought agreement on how to proceed. In the wake of the Good Friday Agreement, he looked forward to increased moves towards normalisation and demilitarisation. He was aware that a crucial moment was approaching in British-Irish relations and he was hopeful that a new political beginning would emerge from the decisions to be taken by the UUC over the coming weekend.

3. The **GOC** agreed that the forthcoming UUC meeting was a particularly significant event which was full of potential for either good or ill. He stressed that the British Army's main objective in Northern Ireland was to demilitarise and "to disappear as soon as possible". As far as he was concerned, the Army was "in the business of withdrawal" and he had no wish to see the military involved in any way in the future running of Northern Ireland. There was nevertheless a certain tension at present between military and political objectives. Much demilitarisation had already occurred but the desire to dismantle military installations had to be delicately balanced against the risk of compromising the security both of his own men and of the civilian population. He was as yet unable to say for certain that the Provisional IRA ceasefire would not be broken. Likewise, only time would tell how serious was the potential threat from the Real IRA and other dissident groups.

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4. The **Irish Joint Secretary** indicated that the Irish Government was fully aware of the threat from dissident groups but that nevertheless an urgent need existed at present - for both political and presentational reasons - to reduce the British military presence in Northern Ireland as soon as possible. He pointed out that the resident military garrison prior to 1969 was less than 3,000 troops and he would like to see a return to such levels. There was no doubt that the heavy military presence in South Armagh had a very damaging impact upon local feelings and there was even the perception in that area that patrolling and helicopter activity had actually increased since the ceasefires had been put in place. By concentrating on the risk from dissidents, it was possible that the current ceasefires and the peace process itself could be put in jeopardy.

5. The **GOC** then proceeded to outline at some length the current level of military presence. He said that he had at his disposal in Northern Ireland six resident battalions together with a further six Royal Irish Regiment battalions (of which one was based permanently in England). In addition he had a *roulement* battalion in South Armagh, another in East Tyrone (which was due to be moved shortly) and another allocated for Belfast (which had recently been moved to England) and three further rear-based battalions which he described as being ring-fenced for the GOC Northern Ireland. There were also three battalions which could be deployed from Britain in an emergency situation. He stressed that the aim was to reduce overall numbers as quickly as possible. He believed that the standard garrison strength under normal peacetime conditions would be five resident battalions, elements of the engineering regiment and the helicopter attachment at RAF Aldergrove. This would amount to about 7,000 soldiers. He admitted that this was not as small as in 1969 but he pointed out that the UK now had fewer overseas (Empire) commitments and more regiments were accordingly home-based. Turning to the question of South Armagh, he accepted that the frequent presence of helicopters could be very intrusive for the civilian population but there was really no other safe method of protecting the RUC stations in the area, transferring personnel in and out and even removing rubbish from outposts. It could not be ignored that South Armagh continued to be a "potential engine-room for terrorism" and had been the place of construction for several of the major bombing outrages of recent years (including Canary Wharf). It was essential therefore that the army maintain its military capability in the area; it was conceivable that considerable time would be required to reduce significantly the terrorist threat. It could be argued in any event that the army was only in South Armagh to provide support for police requirements; the treatment meted out recently in the area to electricity meter and TV licence inspectors was surely evidence that normal policing conditions did not yet exist.

Including RIR?

installations

6. The Irish side then averted to the fact that the Royal Irish Regiment (RIR) was composed almost entirely of recruits form one side of the community and that

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there had been several instances of sectarian behaviour by its members - particularly when on patrol in nationalist areas. Indeed there was evidence emerging which suggested that former or serving members of the RIR may have been implicated in the murder of Rosemary Nelson and in other sectarian atrocities. Under these circumstances, it would surely be inappropriate for the RIR to provide the main military support to the new policing service in coming years.

7. The **GOC** responded to the effect that entry standards and the internal code of behaviour in the RIR were of the highest standard. He admitted that mistakes had been made in the past, particularly in the 1970s, when loyalist elements had been admitted to the UDR and the RUC Reserve without proper vetting. The strictest vetting and surveillance procedures were now in place, however, and there was no possibility that any serving member of the RIR could engage in illegal or inappropriate political behaviour without detection. The RIR was subject in full to the rules that applied to every other regiment in the British Army. In any event he could foresee the time when the part-time element in the RIR would become a natural casualty of normalisation. If no security requirement were to exist, the regular battalions could also be expected to decrease by a process of natural wastage; for all he knew, the RIR might even disappear in its entirety. The **Irish Joint Secretary** recalled that the total disarmament of all sides in Northern Ireland was the objective of his Government and the RIR would have to be included in this equation. He was also concerned by reports that the RIR had been observed to have engaged in patrols without police accompaniment. The **British Joint Secretary** stated that in fact the RIR had virtually ceased all such activity which was being left very much to the RUC.

? I wonder

8. The **Irish Joint Secretary** then referred to the normalisation procedures which had been agreed between the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister at Hillsborough on 5 May. It was essential that these should be carried through as soon as possible. He brought up the question of the observation post at Cloghogue on the main Dublin to Belfast road just outside Newry where it appeared that only half of the military post was being shut down.

9. The **GOC** replied that the demilitarisation package was proceeding as agreed even though some of his troops might be subjected to increased risk as a result. The entire observation post at Cloghogue would in fact be closed but the observation tower further up the hill would be retained - it was an essential part of the observation network in South Armagh and was never included in the Hillsborough package; without the full network of towers in place, adequate protection against the terrorist threat which still existed in the South Armagh

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area could not be maintained. As had already been announced, however, the long-established military base at Fort George in Derry would be dismantled (he hinted that some form of "detoxification" of the structure would be required following the transfer of troops to Ebrington Barracks on the east bank of the Foyle); the military installations at Cookstown would also be dismantled in the near future although he had some concerns about the security of those soldiers who would remain behind. Returning to the question of the observation tower network in South Armagh, he claimed that none of these towers could be dismantled without leaving dangerous gaps in the surveillance of what continued to be a very dangerous area. In response to queries from the Irish side, he admitted that the Provisional IRA were still the dominant force on the ground but that the Real IRA had clearly made inroads and some degree of overlap between the two organisations could not be discounted. Certain families had been identified whose sympathies lay definitively with the dissidents. The failed mortar attack on the observation tower at Glasdrummond the previous night had been a potentially lethal event and had demonstrated that the dissidents were capable of carrying out attacks in an unexpectedly professional manner.

10. The **Irish Joint Secretary** thanked the GOC for his clear statement of intent but stressed the importance of proceeding with further acts of normalisation as a matter of urgency. The observation post on top of the Divis Flats was an undoubted source of irritation to the people of the Falls Road and he wondered if it could be removed in the near future. The **GOC** responded that the recent removal of the Whiterock and Broadway bases had been a high risk decision on his part; the Divis observation post was all that remained in West Belfast and was an essential tool in combatting activity by dissidents in that part of the city. Observation posts once removed could only be reinstated with great difficulty and at great expense. Before the Divis post could be removed, more time would be required to analyse developments on the ground and to assess the broader political situation.

11. The **Irish Joint Secretary** then referred to the many document finds in loyalist areas which had been made in recent months and the evidence that many of the details relating to republican activists and other individuals had been removed from army files. The **GOC** claimed in response that these finds consisted solely of old documents which had been pilfered in the 1980s. He stressed that, since the murder of Patrick Finucane in 1989, internal army regulations had been tightened considerably and the loss (or misplacement) of a file was now treated in the same way as the loss of a weapon and the commanding officer would be held responsible for all such thefts. While he did not deny that these outdated documents could be dangerous in the wrong hands, their value to terrorists was now greatly reduced by the fact that their accuracy had greatly diminished with time.

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Comment

12. The GOC, who is 57 years of age, suggested that he might retire from his present post in Northern Ireland either this coming October or in October 2001. Overall, he came across as a forthright individual who wishes to do his job in a professional manner and to comply fully with whatever directions he may receive from his political masters. At the conclusion of the dinner he stated, without prompting, that Northern Ireland had been a failed political entity for the past 80 years but that the Good Friday Agreement now gave the people of Northern Ireland the opportunity to establish successful democratic institutions through a process of cooperation and inclusiveness. He gave us the impression that in this - and in every other comment he had to make - he was reflecting very closely the official views of the establishment in Whitehall and of the Blair Government He stressed furthermore that he profoundly respected the views and aspirations of the Irish Government and that he was anxious to work as closely as permissible with the authorities in the Republic. [He added that he had paid a visit to Irish Army HQ at the Curragh the previous week and had been greatly impressed by the unique combination of camaraderie and professionalism he had encountered there.]

Niall Holohan
29 May 2000

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