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Dear Ian,

When we met on 19 February, you made a number of points about the UDR. I have now had the opportunity to obtain the Army's comments.

First of all, you commented that the UDR's morale was "extremely low", partly because of irresponsible media attacks. There has certainly been some very unhelpful and unwarranted criticism of the UDR recently, and this has of course upset UDR soldiers and their families. As you know, I am in no doubt whatsoever about the indispensable role which the UDR plays in support of the RUC, and I am second to none in my admiration for the bravery, professionalism and integrity of the vast majority of serving and former UDR soldiers. I have been keen to make this clear both in public, and in private to Commander UDR and his men. I must also say that the UDR are very professional and resilient; they have seen adverse publicity come and go before, but they know that they are doing an important job, and they get on with it. As you know, John Cope and I have made a point of visiting all the UDR battalions between us in recent months. Most recently, I visited 4 UDR Enniskillen on 6 March, and I must say that I was most impressed by their professionalism and high morale.

Second, as a general principle, the UDR and other regiments of the Army in Northern Ireland are given the tasks for which they

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are best suited. For example, the UDR's local knowledge makes them best suited for planned patrols for the protection of local security force members, while the Regular Army is often better able to react immediately to incidents. I am assured by the Army that there is no blanket prohibition on the UDR going within two miles of the border; Permanent Cadre soldiers regularly do so in the Castlederg area, on an equal basis with Regular troops. However, part-time soldiers rarely patrol on the border because the Castlederg Company cannot routinely provide patrols of the strength required to operate in a safe and effective manner right up to the border. More generally, the deployment of part-time UDR soldiers is inevitably limited by the fact that they are only available for operations within certain hours, and then have to return to their civilian jobs. Nevertheless, the part-time element of the UDR does continue to provide invaluable military support to the RUC.

Turning to the two incidents you mention, following the murder of Pte Kilpatrick in Castlederg on 9 January, the RUC were first on the scene and took control of the follow up. I understand that no UDR patrols were available for several hours after the murder, by which time there was no need for additional manpower on the scene. It is also important that the IRA often try to draw security forces into one area, so that they can either ambush them en route or launch an attack elsewhere. Consequently, when UDR patrols were available, they were tasked to Sion Mills to protect soft targets there from any secondary attack.

Following the bomb attack at Sion Mills on 15 January, Regular soldiers were tasked to carry out the immediate follow up because no UDR troops were immediately available. By the time that a UDR patrol was available, it was not needed at Sion Mills, but was tasked to carry out soft target protection in the Castlederg area, in case of secondary attack. By contrast, following the previous bomb attack in Sion Mills on 7 November 1989, UDR soldiers were among the first to be deployed, and spent the next 48 hours on the cordon there.

I hope that this clarifies the position. I have had your concerns investigated in detail by the Army. They are of course operational matters which are the responsibility of the GOC, but I am satisfied that there are sound military reasons for the way in which the UDR is deployed in support of the RUC. I suspect that some of these concerns may have been expressed by part-time soldiers, who may not always be in a position to see the whole strategic picture and the tactical response. I have asked that, if possible, their briefings in future make it clear to them their important part in the jigsaw of the whole Army operation in support of the police.

If the concerns were expressed to you by members of the public, I would ask you to reassure them that there is sound, operational logic behind all Army deployments, which are based on the principle of attacking terrorism, whilst defending vulnerable targets, although clearly the precise grounds for such moves cannot be broadcast for obvious reasons.

I sincerely
Pat Bondie

PB