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Monday, March 9, 2009

Security forces on high alert against further dissident attacks



Forensic officers examine the scene outside Massereene Barracks in Antrim town yesterday following the shooting on Saturday night at the British army base in which two soldiers were killed.
Photograph: Stephen Davison

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GERRY MORIARTY, DAN KEENAN and CONOR LALLY

THE BRITISH and Irish security forces and intelligence services are to remain on high alert "for the foreseeable future" against further dissident republican attacks after two British soldiers were shot dead at Massereene British army base in Antrim town on Saturday night.

MI5, the PSNI and the Garda are becoming increasingly concerned at the sophistication, capability and capacity of dissident groups to mount attacks similar to the shooting in Antrim which left two soldiers dead and a Polish pizza delivery man in a critical condition. Two other British soldiers and a second pizza delivery man were also injured.

A male caller using a recognised code word told the Sunday Tribune yesterday the Real IRA was responsible. He said: "We make no apologies for the attack on Massereene British army base, nor for shooting the pizza delivery men who were collaborating with British rule by servicing British soldiers."

He said further details would emerge in the coming days from the Real IRA about the attack.

The attack triggered widespread shock and revulsion. All the main parties condemned the shootings although it was noted the first Sinn Féin response did not come until 14 hours after the shootings, with Gerry Adams describing the killings as "wrong and counter-productive".

Taoiseach Brian Cowen and British prime minister Gordon Brown insisted dissident republicans would not succeed in destabilising the powersharing institutions. Mr Brown is expected to raise the killings and the threat with Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness, both of whom said they were determined dissident republicans would not undermine the political process.

The First Minister and Deputy First Minister have delayed their trip to the US where they are to meet US president Barack Obama on St Patrick's Day. They were due to fly to the US yesterday.

The Garda Commissioner Fachtna Murphy and Sir Hugh Orde were due to meet for talks in Dublin on Thursday to discuss recent intelligence on the increased threat from dissidents. However, The Irish Times understands the talks will now be brought forward and may take place as early as tomorrow at Garda Headquarters in the Phoenix Park, Dublin.

Mr Murphy and Sir Hugh spoke briefly by telephone yesterday.

Garda sources last night said known dissident republicans living in the Republic were being monitored. Sources said members of a Derry-based Real IRA cell, among the suspects for Saturday's attack, had been monitored recently at least twice in the Republic. On one occasion they were photographed by gardai at a protest rally. They were also arrested and questioned in relation to activities linked to the Real IRA.

In The Irish Times in January Fachtna Murphy said the threat from dissidents could not be underestimated and still required significant Garda resources.

The two soldiers who were killed, whose names have not yet been released, were wearing desert fatigues at the time of the attack. Just hours after the shooting they were to fly to Helmand province in Afghanistan with their colleagues in the 38th engineering regiment. They are not from Northern Ireland.

They were the first soldiers to be killed in Northern Ireland since an IRA sniper shot dead Lance Corporal Stephen Restorick in south Armagh in 1997.

The two soldiers and two of their colleagues were shot when they went to the gates of the Massereene base to receive separate pizza deliveries around 9.20pm on Saturday. Two masked gunmen opened up with bursts of semi-automatic rifle fire. At least one gunman fired a second burst while the fatally injured soldiers lay on the ground. The two other injured soldiers managed to retreat back inside the base. The delivery men were also targeted and shot, the Polish worker suffering what were described as very serious injuries. "He was hit six times," said one source.

The killings happened shortly after PSNI chief constable Sir Hugh Orde confirmed he requested that British army special forces personnel be deployed to try to counter the threat from dissidents, a decision that was criticised by Sinn Féin and the SDLP.

He said last week that the threat from dissidents was at its highest level since he was appointed chief constable in 2002.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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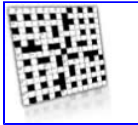
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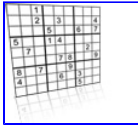
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