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IRELAND



Reference Code:	2005/151/681
Title:	Report of meeting of Inter-departmental Unit on Northern Ireland at which matter of intervention by the Army in Northern Ireland was discussed.
Creation Date(s):	15 April 1975
Level of description:	Item
Extent and medium:	7 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Access Conditions:	Open
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INTER-DEPARTMENTAL UNIT ON NORTHERN IRELAND

REPORT OF MEETING

1. A meeting of the Inter-Departmental Unit on Northern Ireland was held in Government Buildings on Tuesday, 15th April, 1975. The following were present: -

Mr. D. Nally, Department of the Taoiseach (Chairman),
Mr. S. Donlon, Department of Foreign Affairs,
Mr. P. Ó Murchú, Department of Defence,
Mr. P. Colwell (Alternate member) Department of Justice,
Mr. F. O'Donoghue, Department of Finance

Also present were Mr. W. Kirwan, Department of the Taoiseach, Mr. J. McColgan, Department of Foreign Affairs, Mr. L. Murphy, Department of Finance, Mr. S. Brosnan, Department of Defence and Col. B. McGurk of the Army. The Agenda for the meeting is attached.

2. On item 1 of the Agenda, minor amendments were agreed to the draft report of the Unit and the draft Memorandum for the Government which had been circulated. Members signed the report which was agreed. It was accepted that the Memorandum for the Government could now be submitted to the Government. Mr. Donlon undertook to inform his Minister of the course of action being taken, i.e. appending the Unit's report to the Memorandum from the Department of the Taoiseach.
3. On the proposal of the Chairman, it was agreed that items 2 and 3 of the Agenda should be taken together. It was recalled that it had been agreed at the previous meeting of the Unit that the study on negotiated repartition and negotiated independence should be presented to the Government with a covering Memorandum relating it to the current and perspective situation in Northern Ireland.

It was clear that the study on the possibilities of military intervention should also be related to a view of this kind. The Chairman indicated that, in addition, the Cabinet Security Committee had requested the preparation ^{soon} of an up-to-date Memorandum on the situation in Northern Ireland. It was agreed that the Department of Foreign Affairs would prepare a draft Memorandum on the general situation which would be circulated to other members of the Unit. When member's comments had been received and taken account of in the preparation of the Memorandum, it would then be presented to the Minister for Foreign Affairs for approval, prior to submission to the Government.

4. The Unit considered the report by the Army Study Group on The Military Problems raised in Discussion Paper No. 2, dated June 1974 which had been circulated. Col. McGurk indicated that, so far as the Army was concerned, it seemed that the Government would need to take a firm decision as to whether it would intervene in Northern Ireland in certain circumstances. As things stood at present, the Army was not in a position to intervene military^{ly} in Northern Ireland. To put it in a position to do so, it would be necessary to set up a planning and intelligence staff, to reorganise the Defence Forces and to transfer the burden of security duties from the Permanent Defence Force to the F.C.A. It would be necessary to release about 5,000 men for ² Group training. Due to the pressure of security duties in recent years, the training undertaken had been largely confined to personal or individual training. In reply to a question, Col. McGurk indicated that the numbers involved in the planning to which he had referred might be about 30-40. He agreed that it would be difficult to disguise what was being done. In reply to another question, he indicated that the Army authorities envisaged the call-up

the Reserve Defence Force during the six months period postulated for the training of troops of the Permanent Defence Force released from security duties. This call-up would require the declaration of a State of Emergency under the Defence Act, 1954.

5. The question was raised as to whether there was any need for a specific decision by the Government in relation to the steps that were proposed in the Army Study. It was suggested that it was unrealistic to expect a decision, at the present time, to intervene militarily in certain circumstances. The most that could be expected was a decision not to exclude intervention as a possibility.

It was also suggested that any change in the role which the Army had played since 1969 would in fact require a specific Government decision. The point was made that while planning was a continuing activity in the Defence Forces, the preparation of plans in the specific context of Northern Ireland should, in the view of the Department of Defence, be taken only on foot of a Government decision.

6. Reference was made to a number of proposals in the study which, if implemented, might, in certain circumstances, give notice of what ~~was~~ ^{is} being done. These included the move from a passive to an active posture in relation to intelligence, the training of nominated units for nominated tasks ^{and} at the provision ^{of accommodation} for additional troops. While it might be possible to do these things in a way which would not give notice, the declaration of a State of Emergency under the 1954 Act would put anyone on notice that certain preparations were being undertaken. In discussion on this point, it emerged that the only alternative method of releasing members of the Permanent Defence Force for training was to run down

the role of the Army in aid of the Civil Power.

7. It was suggested that it would be useful if the intelligence people in the Army were to consult with the Department of Foreign Affairs in relation to information on Northern Ireland. The Department had a large body of information which it accessed from the political point of view. Some of this would also be useful from a military point of view. There were some statements in the Army Study which did not accord with information available in the Department, for example, in relation to the estimated strength of the UVF. In addition, the study did not seem fully to reflect the extent of information now in our possession on the population distribution within Northern Ireland, although, some of this information, at least, had been communicated to the Army authorities.
8. The Chairman suggested that in presenting the study to the Government, the Unit would have to consider the question as to whether the various preparations, suggested in the Study, were in fact necessary, having regard to the involving situation in Northern Ireland. He invited Mr. Donlon, who had recently been in the North, to give an outline of the current situation. Mr. Donlon said that all these indications were that the Convention was probably doomed to fail and that the main question arising was when this would occur. The SDLP were prepared to work ^{on} ~~a~~ ^{the} Convention over a period ^{of} months, unless it became clear that the Loyalists intended to make a ^{force} ~~dash~~ of the proceedings or to use the Convention as a vehicle for a straight-forward takeover of power in Northern Ireland. The SDLP expected that the Convention would convene in ^{plenary} ~~planning~~ session fairly quickly after the election; that a number

of Committees, perhaps four, would be established to deal with various aspects of the future Government of Northern Ireland; that the plenary session of the Convention would then adjourn, leaving the Committees to work on their remitts over the explosive months of the Summer Season; that the plenary session would reconvene in September or October and would probably break down at that point. This was the SDLP assessment but they claimed that they had cross-checked it with a number of people on the Loyalist side who had indicated that it conformed with their own expectations. The Official Unionist Party were anxious not to give the impression of bringing about an early collapse of the Convention before it had been given an opportunity to attempt to find a settlement. On the other hand, Mr. William Craig seemed to envisage the crunch coming in about five or six weeks. The general assessment was that, in the event of a collapse of the Convention, the British would probably stay in Northern Ireland, continuing direct rule. However, it was unlikely that the British had yet considered this matter in detail and if the Convention were a total failure it could not be excluded that there would be a change in attitude in the Autumn. It was mentioned that there was very strong pressure within the Tory Party to maintain the Union and a fear that a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland would be the first step in the break up of the United Kingdom. The Chairman mentioned that, in discussions between Mr. Wilson and the Taoiseach, the British Prime Minister had also laid stress on this aspect of the Matter.

9. It was suggested that the preparations outlined in the Army Study should be undertaken in any case, on a contingency basis, even if it was considered that an abrupt British withdrawal was unlikely. The Chairman said that the

Difficulty here was that if the preparations were to become known, they might ~~precipitate~~ the violence in Northern Ireland against which they were designed to ensure. The British had been unable to control violence with forces ranging from 15,000 to 20,000 in number, even though that violence was coming almost exclusively from the minority community. If any action on our part were to ~~precipitate~~ large scale violence on the part of the majority community, it was very doubtful whether we would be in a position to contain it. He suggested that the Unit propose that preparations should be advanced as far as was possible without giving any overt sign that they were being undertaken. Mr. Colwell indicated that, while he did ^{not} fully describe to the pessimistic assessment given by the Chairman, his view was that any action taken in here now, involving the Army, would be associated with Northern Ireland. He raised the question how far military intervention could contain the situation effectively ^{and the ultimate} One purpose of intervention. had to ask the question what one did following intervention. He accepted that the Army should be ready for whatever situation might arise and should be built up in numbers. His doubts related to the period ^{even} which this build-up should be undertaken. It was noted that the Army Study had drawn attention to the possibility that intervention would lead to a repartition and to the need to consider the political aspects of this matter. It was suggested that it would be necessary to relate the possibility of military intervention to the question of the forms of political settlement which the Government might be prepared to accept, in certain circumstances.

10. Reference was made to the suggestions made in the Army Study that consideration should be given to embarking on a policy of ^{deterrence} ~~vis-a-vis~~ the Loyalists. Mr. Donlon said that this policy was frequently advocated by Catholics in the North

himself had *grave* doubts about its effectiveness. He considered it unlikely that, in the event of Loyalist violence on a larger scale, there would be wholesale *pogroms* of Catholics in Belfast or County Antrim. He would not see the rate of deaths exceeding *500-600* a year which was no more than double the death rate in 1972. The Chairman referred to the intensity of the violence which had occurred in Belfast in 1969, on a *relatively* minor *pre-texts* ^{and at other periods in the history of the North.} It was not possible to make a rational assessment of the likely scale of death and injuries in a situation such as that being considered which would be very emotional, in practice. In further discussion on the possible outcome following a breakdown of the Convention, Mr. Donlon indicated that one possibility was that the British would stay on terms set by the Loyalist. One might see a return to the old Stormont, dressed in new clothes. Given the war *weariness* among the minority population, they might acquiesce in this development for a time but it would inevitably give rise to a further outbreak of violence which might not be too long delayed.

11. It was agreed that Mr. Kirwan would consult the members of the Unit, with a view to producing a covering paper to accompany the study undertaken by the Army authorities.
12. The meeting then concluded.