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Reference Code: 2005/151/681

Title: Memorandum by Walter Kirwan, Principal Officer, Department of the Taoiseach in relation to the decision of Government of 23 April 1975 on the relief of distress in Northern Ireland and submitting a supplementary memorandum to modify the decision in relation to treatment of civilian casualties.

Creation Date(s): 29 August 1975

Level of description: Item

Extent and medium: 2 pages

Creator(s): Department of the Taoiseach

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Supplementary Memorandum for the Government on Relief of Distress

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Mr. Keenan
 Re circulated
 draft memo
 4/3/76

Rúnaí

1. I understand that the item, Northern Ireland Situation, has been replaced on the Cabinet Agenda. Among the Memoranda before Ministers on that general subject is one from this Department, dated 23 Aibreán, 1975, on Relief of Distress. The passage of time calls for at least one modification in the decisions sought in that Memorandum. This arises from the fact that, in the interval, the Department of Health were authorised to hold confidential discussions with chief officers of health boards - Government authorisation for this had been sought in the Memorandum. I attach for approval prior to circulation to interested Departments, a draft Supplementary Memorandum on relief of distress which covers, inter alia, progress made with plans for treating casualties.

2. A second possible modification to the decisions sought previously is a matter for judgement. In the April Memorandum, we recommended that advance orders be placed for bedding and non-perishable foodstuffs, to cater for up to 20,000 refugees from the North. The IDU had made a recommendation to this effect although it suggested that plans be made to cater for up to 100,000 refugees. The suggested level of orders was influenced by concern that larger orders might give rise to speculation about their purpose and, if they became known publicly, as would be all too likely, might be misconstrued in Northern Ireland, with serious consequences on the political plane and in violence. However, our Memorandum also recognised that if a large influx of refugees were to occur and find us manifestly unprepared, the Government would be subjected to considerable criticism, at a time when maintenance of its authority and of support for its policies was of the highest importance, while the refugees could suffer great hardship. The level of orders reflected the balance between the opposing considerations that was seen to be appropriate at the time the Memorandum was submitted.

3. However, I consider that this balance has now shifted. In the interval, the Convention elections have been held, the parties in the Convention have held talks in an endeavour to seek agreement, an attempt that we are now reliably informed is doomed to fail, and the level of sectarian killings has mounted steeply again. The expectations of political parties in the North are that violence is all too likely to occur on an even greater scale if the Convention is seen to fail to agree. Mr. Craig expressed the view to John McColgan of the Department of Foreign Affairs (and McColgan said in his report that he could not over-emphasise this as being a very clear and deliberate message) that any solution apart from some agreed form of devolved government will lead inevitably to a civil war. It was also clear that Craig saw this as not, in present circumstances, being very far away in time.

4. The future of ^{the} IRA ceasefire is an important feature in any prognosis. It has generally been considered by informed observers that it would be continued only until the Convention reported (its initial six months' life expires on 8th November). They have been able to trade on the ambiguity of British dealings with them and on ideas that some deal had been done with them, involving a British declaration of intent to withdraw. Mr. Rees' fairly unequivocal declaration, earlier this week, that the British Government would not withdraw in the event of a failure of the Convention makes it less easy for the Provisionals to trade on British ambivalence. Indeed, there are indications that the ceasefire is already being phased out. It may soon be declared openly to be at an end. This could be the signal for a

was this
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much greater level of attacks on the minority by the Loyalist para-military organisations who have been meeting recently in the Ulster Army Council and in the separate, UVF-centred "federation", very likely to make plans to this end.

5. It is clear

- (i) that the political process is in grave danger of becoming frozen and that there is little danger of fruitful progress being prejudiced by any speculation about the purpose of orders of bedding; and
- (ii) that violence on a large scale is now more likely and more imminent.

I consider that we must now recommend a higher level of advance orders. However, I have not gone as far, in the draft Memorandum, as recommending provision for 100,000. Instead, I have settled on 50,000 as being sufficient to deal with the first waves of refugees, in the belief that time would be available to secure any balance of equipment and supplies needed - which I think should be available - from an appeal to the public here. I was also influenced by the budgetary difficulties.

6. The reference in paragraph 6 of the draft to separate reports on the Northern Ireland situation generally is based on a belief that the Department of Foreign Affairs will be submitting a further Memorandum shortly. I understand this to be likely. I would envisage, that, ideally, our Memorandum should be circulated simultaneously. However, in view of the need for an early decision on advance orders, I think it should go ahead on its own, if there is delay in the submission of a general Memorandum. Draft Memorandum is accordingly submitted for approval, please.

W. Kinver

29 Lúnasa, 1975.

P. S. To avoid news of advance orders of bedding becoming known in the North, it might be worth requesting the editors of the newspapers and the Head of News in RTÉ, to refrain from reporting any ~~speculation~~ information about such orders or any speculation about their purpose. However, it might be better to rely on their discretion and only to make a request in the event that experience showed it to be necessary. The G.I.S. could advise on this matter.