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between Fr O'Connor of DACRAS [Catholic  
diocesan relief advisory services in Northern  
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Defence and Department of the Taoiseach

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Report of a Meeting between Fr. O'Connor of DACRAS  
and Government Officials

Fr. O'Connor of DACRAS came to Iveagh House on Friday, 31 January 1975 to meet officials of various departments. Present at the meeting were Mr. McColgan (Foreign Affairs), Mr. Healy (D/Defence), Mr. Kirwan (D/Taoiseach) and Mr. Bolster (Foreign Affairs).

Mr. McColgan welcomed Fr. O'Connor, thanked him for coming and pointed out the usefulness of such contact. He then mentioned the cyclical nature of the crisis and asked Fr. O'Connor if its imminence had now receded. Fr. O'Connor said that he thought that February-March did not now appear to be so dangerous and that he thought the crisis might come in the Autumn.

Mr. Kirwan enquired if there was a flagging of interest in the present relief work and its necessity. To this Fr. O'Connor replied that he had been visiting committees and getting committees started and moving where action had been slow or non-existent. He had visited 9 or 10 committees so far in the Greater Belfast Area; they had done a lot of work and there was no question of abandoning the work. Sectarian assassinations were still a problem. Mr. Healy asked if there could be problems from the Loyalists in light of current political developments. Fr. O'Connor said that the Loyalists would have no difficulty in creating a difficult situation.

*Whether people in Belfast felt there would*  
Mr. Kirwan asked if ~~the IRA had to have a recurrence of violence?~~  
*be a resumption of full scale violence*  
Fr. O'Connor, in reply, described the psychological effects of the cease-fire: the relief and relaxation and then the subsequent drop into depression again. He saw a great danger of more sectarian assassinations and even a further escalation of violence in the risk of the Loyalist para-militaries calling off their cease-fire. Moreover, he felt that there was little feeling for peace among young people - in sharp contrast to those over 30 or more so over 50. Nonetheless, the peace movement was building up

and an effort was necessary to guide the under 25s and push them in the right direction.

### Relief and Government Welfare Services

Fr. O'Connor then went on to describe at length his relationship with the Department of Social Services in NI. He pointed out that the people working in welfare were not trusted by the minority: they were <sup>seen as</sup> part of the Protestant establishment who were, by and large, influenced and promoted through bigotry and reluctant to assist "a feckless minority who could be taken over by the Provos". He said that it was <sup>seen as</sup> difficult to get on an equal footing with these welfare people and that the civil servant image they projected compounded the difficulty of their communicating with the people on the parish level.

To overcome these difficulties he had called a meeting of all his (DACRAS) parish committees - about 200-300 people - which was also attended by officials from the Department of Social Services, headed by a Mr. Gillyland (the officer in charge of the Eastern Board). This encounter had been most useful: the people had expressed their grievances openly and had been able to experience the difficulty of having to deal with people like Mr. Gillyland. Mr. Gillyland was also enabled to see the difficulties that Fr. O'Connor had to contend with and the pressures that he was under.

Subsequently Fr. O'Connor met Mr. Gillyland and discussed the problem of stores with him. He wanted to know where stores were available, what these stores consisted of and how they could be got to needy parishes in time of emergency. He pointed out the inaccessibility of some Catholic parishes.

The Department of Social Services has a limited supply of stores (4-6 days) under their control, including a major store in Utility Street. Fr. O'Connor wanted some of these stores to be

handed over to DACRAS but Gillyland was <sup>initially</sup> against this idea. However, Fr. O'Connor <sup>had overcome his objections and had</sup> succeeded in having 15½ tons of stores moved from Utility Street to <sup>DACRAS control at</sup> St. Mary's Training College at the top of Broadway to serve all the parishes in the Falls Road area. In addition 5½ tons of stores had been sent to Somerton Road. Negotiations were going on for <sup>transfer of stores to DACRAS for</sup> the parishes of Ardoyne and Ligoniel.

Fr. O'Connor had sent a letter to all the parish priests in the areas involved advising them that these stores were to supplement rather than be a substitute or a replacement for their parish stores.

Mr. Gillyland was to contact his counterparts in other districts and Fr. O'Connor <sup>had</sup> was going to advise <sup>the</sup> parish priests to start negotiations with them. <sup>, noting that West Belfast could be cited as a</sup> North-West Belfast was a test case of the <sup>would</sup> de facto principle for inaccessible parishes and since this was being successfully handled he did not expect problems with other similar parishes. Welfare Officers would be assigned in due course to each store-centre to supervise the recycling of supplies as necessary and for other supervisory duties.

Intricate subterfuges were being employed as smokescreens to conceal this transfer of stores to the various centres. Fr. O'Connor felt that the Provos either saw through them or would do so in due course. <sup>In fact, he had understood they already knew</sup> and he said that a number of priests had decided to denounce the Provos publicly from the pulpit in the event of their attempting a takeover of these supplies. This whole aspect of the operation was risky and the Provos could <sup>take over stores and</sup> gain credit for providing <sup>them</sup> stores; but this risk was unavoidable and would have to be taken. The possibility of the Provos gaining strength from a DACRAS base <sup>become more hand-line because of the existence of</sup> was ~~also~~ slightly diminished because DACRAS had been able to keep out of their way and operate effectively for 7 months and the Provos could well only earn discredit by taking stores away at this stage. Fr. O'Connor then went on to describe some of the work done in other parishes: the Markets was well-prepared; other ~~better~~ parishes throughout the city had already spent up to £1,000 each.

*about the store in St. Mary's College*

*of these Catholicism under-estimated.*

Similar arrangements for the provision and distribution of stores were also being negotiated with the Northern Board whose director is a Mr. Smyth. Mr. Smyth was described as being very co-operative and open and Fr. O'Connor had a good working relationship with him.

During the month of February, Fr. O'Connor intends to make a tour of the country parishes, report to them on progress made already in the city and get reports from them on their achievements. They will then be encouraged to co-operate and deal directly with the Northern Board and strategic country parishes will then be selected and major centres established there. A previous tour of the country parishes had shown up disappointing results and it was now necessary to pick some reliable parishes in North Antrim as refugee centres or in Down as transit-centres in case of a crisis. The country parishes posed a problem because they were not attuned to violence or to the likely seriousness of the situation if trouble broke out. Fr. O'Connor ~~felt that the level of violence could be worse in the country than in the city in the event of a civil war.~~ *felt that while violence might be slower to ignite in the country or it could be worse than once it started.*

(In reply to a question from Mr. Healy concerning the structure in which Messrs. Gillyland and Smyth worked, Fr. O'Connor said that they were working for local authorities with very strong links to central services.)

Fr. O'Connor then read out a typical list of stores *received from the welfare authorities* and will forward us fuller details in due course.

With regard to the other dioceses in Northern Ireland, Fr. O'Connor said that he had little hard information about them. Dr. Philbin was unenthusiastic about his contacting them.

Fr. O'Connor had been contacted by the Cardinal some time ago but nothing had happened since this first meeting. However, he felt that Fr. Moran of Armagh diocese had told the DSS official in Newry (Mr. Preston) far too much and had given him too much information

about the structures of the relief organisations. Fr. Moran had been promised co-operation by Preston, but in Fr. O'Connor's view, Fr. Moran was far too trusting and naive. Fr. O'Connor met Fr. Moran one month ago and two further meetings have been arranged to meet priests in Armagh and Cookstown. When Fr. O'Connor said that he knew absolutely nothing about Dromore, Mr. McColgan said that he would arrange for him to meet Fr. Brookes of St. Colman's College, Newry, who has helped us with related-type information in the past.

Fr. O'Connor displayed some forms he had prepared:

- (a) list of relief centres;
- (b) information for claiming compensation for damage;
- (c) form for claiming compensation.

(Copies of the above forms are attached to this report.)

Returning briefly to the situation in Belfast, Fr. O'Connor felt that overall it was good and he expressed himself impressed with what he had seen. He briefly alluded to fuel for transportation and said that it was the responsibility of each individual parish. He was advising that supplies be stockpiled by having large numbers of people store the one statutory legal gallon. This would furthermore induce a sense of responsibility over a wider area and it would not be an easy target for hi-jacking by the Provos.

#### The Security Forces and Keeping Roads Open

Fr. O'Connor has had one meeting with the Army (General Sir Frank King and Brigadier Crutchley) in which he described the situation, as he saw it, to them in general and raised the question of movement of civilians and routes in the event of a crisis. He also handed to them a <sup>blank</sup> copy of a form which he has distributed to all parishes and which is for the purpose of gathering all relevant information with regard to relief work (relief centres, safe routes within parishes, staging areas, safe routes to other parishes out of the city, etc.). Fr. O'Connor already has in his possession all these forms completed

with them!

for the city area and he told the Army that he would give them a copy if his committees agreed. King was not very forthcoming about Army co-operation for protection and opening of routes, *but Father O'Connor thought this was partly because he himself had been rather guarded in his talks.* Fr. O'Connor then asked Mr. McColgan if the Department could help him to co-ordinate all this relief information on the parish map and the tribal map of Belfast. Mr. McColgan agreed.

In reply to questions Fr. O'Connor stated that the supply situation was good and that further stores could be obtained by negotiating with the DSS. Generators had not been given out yet but he was convinced that they were available. He felt that the benefit of having generators would be mostly in the form of a psychological boost since they would never be able to supply electricity on a wide scale. Although beds and bedding had not been handed out yet there were precedents for *dist/markings* these items *available* and they would not involve a new set of negotiations with the DSS. The Protestants controlled all the electricity and gas outlets but he did not believe that they could isolate and cut off any specific area without harm to themselves (the proximity of the Falls and the Shankill) unless they resorted to tearing down poles, etc., and they then ran the risk of similar counter action by the Provos. Work still had to be done about acquiring drugs and improving child welfare centres (many of the present ones would be inaccessible to the minority). The welfare people ran the risk of having their distribution activities to date exposed by publicity, but Fr. O'Connor felt that they were jealous of their supplies and they feared the UDA as much as the minority feared the Provos.

Mr. Healy (D/Defence) then reported on the plans in train here. He pointed out the difficulty of trying to plan for unpredictable numbers of refugees and referred to action taken in 1972, quoting figures for the peak season of that year. He also referred to the problems of expense involved. Then he described registration procedures and arrangements for transit stations before going

further South. He promised to send Fr. O'Connor copies of previous registration forms. In reply to a request from Mr. McColgan, Mr. Healy also said that he would revise and draw up a list of essential items that any refugees should try to bring with them.

Mr. Kirwan briefly <sup>referred to</sup> ~~outlined what arrangements had been made in other areas and described in some detail plans made by the Department of Health for the reception of the sick or wounded.~~

In conclusion Mr. McColgan said that Fr. O'Connor's detailed exposé had shown how much good work had been accomplished to date and he thanked him once more for coming. The meeting was concluded.

After lunch Fr. O'Connor met briefly again with Mr. McColgan and Mr. Bolster.

It was agreed that he would give the detailed route plans for Belfast to Mr. McColgan and that they would be put on the maps as speedily as possible. Fr. O'Connor was also to be given a copy of the parish map of Northern Ireland and he would try and furnish the Department with statistics for the O.D. (other denominations) population in the parishes of Down and Connor. Furthermore he said that he would check the parish boundary lines and fill in existing blanks.

Referring to the question of communications and the possibility of the telephone system being entirely out of service in time of crisis, Fr. O'Connor said that he was trying to compile a list of ham radio operators in key areas who could supply some sort of communication link. Mr. McColgan said that he would be happy to receive such a list and that he would investigate the feasibility of having the Security Forces (Army) here effect such a link-up from this end.