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CROSSMAGLEN GAA GROUNDS

1. The Minister for Foreign Affairs in his letter dated the 19th December, 1977 indicates that in November, 1976, Sean Ó Síocháin made representations to his predecessor in connection with a further proposed encroachment of the G.A.A. grounds at that time as well as disturbance caused by British Army activities in the area and damage to G.A.A. property. The matter was taken up with the British authorities by the Embassy in London and in the reply received the following assurances were given:-

- (1) that there was absolutely no intention of dispossessing club members of their pitch;
- (2) that there was no intention of restricting in any way the access which members of the club then enjoyed;
- (3) the British authorities added that any damage to the playing area was very much regretted and that compensation could be sought;
- (4) a suggestion that the Army avail of an alternative site suggested by the G.A.A. was turned down on the basis that this particular site was reserved for an industrial project.

2. All of the foregoing was conveyed to Sean Ó Síocháin by letter on 23 December, 1976 with a suggestion that the matter be pursued at local level on the basis of the assurances given by the British authorities. Mr. Ó Síocháin was asked to keep in touch regarding future developments. A letter in similar terms was sent to Mr. Ó Síocháin on 11 March, 1977 and a further letter inquiring as to the result of local discussions was also issued on the 16th August, 1977. Until Mr. Ó Murchú's correspondence with the Taoiseach which commenced with a letter dated 30 Samhain, 1977 no feed-back in the matter was received from the G.A.A.

3. Mr. Ó Murchú in his letter of 30 Samhain gives a general account of the background to the problem at Crossmaglen. He mentions one particular incident which occurred towards the end of 1976 when an under-14 juvenile football team who wished to play a game in the field were turned away from the ground by a unit of the British Army. A protest on this was conveyed to the Minister for Foreign Affairs at the time. Again in his letter mention is made of the helicopter pad in the grounds which "is constantly used and without fail whenever any activity such as games is taking place in the field, helicopters hover very low over the heads of the players and spectators and drop down regularly during games". In the reply which the Minister for Foreign Affairs sent to Mr. Ó Síocháin on 23 Nollaig, 1976 he indicated that the British Authorities had accepted that it was unfortunately the case that some interference with play had taken place as a result of helicopter landings at Crossmaglen. They were unable, however, to trace details of an incident which took place on the 20th June, 1976, when a helicopter flew over the playing pitch on 16 occasions. In the Minister's letter he conveyed the assurance received from the British Authorities that every effort would be made to minimise the disturbance.

4. Mr. Ó Murchú in this letter refers also to the Possession Order served on the G.A.A. under the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act, 1973. This as he says was resisted strongly by the G.A.A. and representations were conveyed by the Department of Foreign Affairs. In reply the British authorities indicated that the ground in dispute was required for security purposes. They also indicated that there was no intention of dispossessing club members of their pitch nor of restricting in any way the excess available at that time. This was conveyed to Mr. Ó Siocháin at the time.
5. In concluding his letter Mr. Ó Murchú appealed to the Taoiseach to bring his own good offices to bear on the British Government with a view to having the troops withdrawn from the property; full possession of the entire grounds given back to the club; and adequate compensation for damage to pitch property and community gain. At the occasion of the G.A.A. Council meeting in Brussels at the beginning of December, 1977, the Taoiseach availed of the opportunity to mention the problem of the G.A.A. grounds in Crossmaglen to the British Prime Minister in a general way. The Prime Minister undertook at that time to make enquiries in the matter with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and asked that there be no publicity about the Taoiseach's approach. The Taoiseach gave him an undertaking to this effect. In the event however, no response either through diplomatic channels or otherwise was received from the British Prime Minister or the Northern Ireland office to the Taoiseach's approach.
6. Mr. Ó Murchú wrote to the Taoiseach again on the 13th December, 1977 emphasising the need for urgent action and constant pressure as further moves had been made by the British Army, since the date of his previous letter, which suggested more in-roads into the property. Mr. Ó Murchú was of the view that if this was not checked urgently "they will have taken the place over". No substantive evidence was, however, supplied in this letter. Mr. Ó Murchú wrote again on the 31st December complaining that damage and interference as previously outlined was going on as usual. Again he provided no detailed information of the kind needed to process a complaint in a satisfactory way. He asked however that the Taoiseach could keep up the pressures which "you have already outlined as having been taken to ensure that the situation is rectified as a matter of urgency".
7. The next letter from Mr. Ó Murchú in the matter is dated 26 Eanáir, 1978. With it he enclosed some coloured photographs of the damage being done to Crossmaglen grounds. He mentioned that matters had got worse since his last letter and that players and supporters had then to be transported by lorry to the playing pitch which had been made so inaccessible. He also said that he had been reliably informed that recently a large truck was driven into the grounds and kept churning up the ground by continuing to circle around for some time and that a convoy of twenty lorries arrived on the grounds about two weeks prior to the date of his letter and did untold damage.
8. The most recent letter from Mr. Ó Murchú in relation to Crossmaglen on file is that dated 4 Aibreán, 1978 in which he

indicates that the Crossmaglen grounds situation was discussed at the Association's Annual Congress and was stated to be steadily deteriorating. It was unanimously decided at Congress that full pressure be put on all public representatives and on the Government to make determined efforts on behalf of the club. The club are asking that that portion of the ground taken over by the British authorities be handed back and adequate compensation paid for years of possession and also for the overall damage and destruction done to the property. Again in this letter Mr. Ó Murchú expresses fears that further parts of the grounds could be taken over. In support of this he mentions that an adjacent area on the map accompanying his letter of the 4th April had already been acquired and local opinion was that this would lead to a further takeover.

9. None of Mr. Ó Murchú's letter give hard evidence of a substantive type which would enable the Department of Foreign Affairs to process a further complaint with the British Authorities. As indicated already on file a general type complaint, not backed-up by evidence of breaches of the assurances and promises already given, could only lead to a non-specific type of reply from the British. More information is needed particularly in relation to the efforts made locally by the G.A.A. to obtain compensation for the damage and destruction caused to the property. A lot of what Mr. Ó Murchú says in his letters appears to be based on fears held locally of what may happen in the future rather than anything else. Also a request to the British Authorities at this time to return that portion of the ground already taken over by them for security reasons would have no hope of success because of the security situation in the South Armagh area. Having made the point once without success there is hardly much purpose in raising it again at this stage and being refused a second time.

13th April, 1978.

ADDENDUM

Since the foregoing was prepared, two further letters have been received from Mr. Ó Murchú. One dated 11 Aibreán conveys his apologies for not keeping the appointment which he had with the Taoiseach for Monday, 10th April at 3.30 p.m. Unfortunately Mr. Ó Murchú did not receive news of the appointment prior to his leaving Cork to travel to Dublin on that day.

The second letter dated 15 Aibreán conveys further grounds for complaint in regard to British Army and R.U.C. activity at Crossmaglen Grounds. The incident complained of took place on Sunday, April 2nd when Mr. Ó Murchú states troops went through the spectators checking and questioning many of them and concentrating in a particular way on some. Mr. Ó Murchú described the troops as

"pretty tough" and their behaviour as offensive. In support of these allegations he encloses a letter dated 4th April, from Eoin O Dubaigh, Rúnai, Crossmaglen G.A.A. Club, which gives a detailed account of the activities complained of on the date in question. Mr. O Dubaigh complained at the soldiers moving through the crowd checking on various individuals and the R.U.C. were sent for. A complaint was made on the spot that what was taking place was irregular and provocative. In the event the game started 45 minutes late. During the game however a helicopter hovered over the pitch and both players and referee had to duck as the craft was no more than eight feet above the ground. The G.A.A. took the matter up with the authorities at local level and were informed by an R.U.C. Inspector that "they were entitled to carry out I.D. checks where and when they liked". The matter is being followed up at local level.

Mr. Ó Murchú points out in his letter that Club officials are extremely concerned at provocative acts such as this and he requests that the British Authorities be pressed to ensure that these incidents will not arise. He also expresses concern in his letter of the serious possibility of people being goaded into some form of retaliation which the community have been prevailed on to avoid up to now.

20th April, 1978