

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



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1. Following the death of Mrs. Mary Doherty on 13 April 1980 in a car approaching a British Army checkpoint at Lifford Bridge Strabane and another shooting incident at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast we wish to express our concern at the number of inexperienced soldiers engaged in security duties in Northern Ireland particularly at checkpoints. While checkpoints may be necessary for security purposes as long as the present situation continues it is essential that experienced and adequately trained personnel are deployed in this and other areas. A feature of the two recent incidents was the apparent absence of the use of a safety catch on weapons used by the security forces which in the Strabane case led to the tragic death of a mother. It could be reasonably argued that these events occurred in low risk areas, where large numbers of people circulate and where the necessary safety procedures should have been in force. We would emphasise the strong possibility that incidents of a similar nature are likely in the absence of corrective measures to occur in the future particularly at checkpoints.

2. It might be appropriate on this occasion to refer to the considerable inconvenience accruing to the local population at permanent military checkpoints. For many years the permanent checkpoints at Aughnacloy, Co. Tyrone was a cause of delay and frustration to travellers. However now it has been removed. Consequently one is entitled to ask why it is necessary to have a ring of permanent checkpoints along the border with Co. Donegal at Clady Bridge, Mullenan, Muff, Strabane etc. where other areas along the border provide regular evidence of a more serious security situation. It is suggested that consideration might be given by the British authorities to setting up random checks in their area of operations and ending the use of permanent checkpoints which are a cause of aggravation.

3. Another aspect of the situation is the detention of persons at checkpoints without being informed of their rights under the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1978 and the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions Act 1976.

4. Another irritant is the use made of checkpoints by the RUC to make petty checks on the roadworthiness of vehicles.
5. If it is decided that the above views should be brought to the attention of the British authorities reference might also be made to their general approach to security. In view of the regular claims by the British that security on our side of the border is not adequate we might mention that while our police and troops patrol the border right up to the boundary it would appear that on the Northern side a fairly deep strip is covered only by spot patrols.
6. It might also be impressed on the British authorities that border security should be operated as much as possible by the police. If it is necessary that the British Army be used on particular occasions it is likewise essential to eliminate the kind of trigger-happy incidents that have taken place recently on a number of occasions. In current circumstances it would be preferable that apart from these special occasions the British Army should keep as low a profile as possible.
7. In conclusion we mention the attitude of British troops towards persons crossing the border. Quite apart from the undesirable manner of some regiments, particularly the Scottish, there appears to be an attitude permeating the British Army that the border is of the conventional type separating totally different peoples and cultures. This is clearly not the case. Most people crossing back and forth are merely travelling to or from work, visiting relations, attending church, going to an outfarm or some other everyday activity. In fact people travelling in the region are only continuing the practice of previous generations.