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22 September 1988

Mr. D. A. Gallagher
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division

A contact with General Waters

Dear Assistant Secretary

1. Mr. Ryan and I met with the GOC (Northern Ireland) General Waters and a number of his senior officers on September 20th. We travelled to Lisburn on this occasion since Gen. Waters' predecessor had visited the Secretariat on the occasion of the last contact (see Mr. Lillis' report of 30.1.87).
2. They availed of the occasion to give us what the British side of the Secretariat confirmed was the standard British Army briefing on Northern Ireland. Their overall assessment concentrated, predictably enough, on the threat of the Provisional IRA, who were seen as intent on achieving a significant escalation of violence and bringing the conflict to a head, in contrast to the "long haul" mentality which had earlier prevailed among them. Statistics on "pre-Eksund" shipments were marshalled to show the scope of the threat, which was further dramatised by a display of captured hardware, and it was emphasised that much of these resources had yet to come into play. There was reference to the loyalist paramilitary threat, but this was regarded as both more reactive and less formidable and was dealt with by the RUC. Although the officer briefing us on the issue went out of his way to stress that the press could be entirely wrong in attributing a border dimension to some incidents, such as the Ballygawley bus bombing, there was nevertheless a very strong emphasis, perhaps for our benefit, on terrorist exploitation of the border. Their assessment of the scope for improvement in cross border security cooperation to meet this threat followed closely the lines of the papers transmitted earlier this year by Mr. Stanley. It was unclear whether the military had carefully espoused these items as the official British policy or whether Mr. Stanley had transmitted with great fidelity the Army's shopping list.
3. A number of points are worth noting from the briefing. Colonel Vyvyan, the officer in charge of the new border brigade, was at pains to stress the close working relationship between himself and Assistant Chief Constable Maurice Johnson, the RUC liaison officer, illustrated by the fact that they and their staff operated from adjoining offices in Drummad Barracks. He implied their coordination was such as to render

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debates on police primacy meaningless. We learned that there is a joint directive from the GOC and the Chief Constable whereby the latter has delegated certain functions to the Army. We were unable to establish the precise terms of this division of labour, although it seemed from some later remarks that the army has the operational role in anti-terrorism operations which the police concentrate on "normal" policing. Given the circumstances along the Border, this would seem to suggest that the doctrine of "police primacy" in the border brigade area is more a matter of theory than practice.

4. A further area of interest related to the UDR. Brigadier Bray, who was present, spoke of the growing emphasis on developing the fulltime cadre, (now just under 3,000 in strength) as opposed to the part-time membership. The UDR was now responsible for military back-up in some 80% of the Northern Ireland area. They had experimented with the deployment near Middletown of UDR personnel from the Ballymena area. This had worked very well and they were planning to extend the practice. He gave details of the improved training of UDR members and paid florid tribute to their courage and restraint. He confirmed that in areas where the UDR were regarded as primarily responsible for military support the UDR officers would tend to have operational command when other British Army units were operating with them.

5. In the discussion which followed the briefing we took the line that we thought it would be proper for us to stress the political picture, as they had understandably concentrated on a purely military perspective. We emphasised the political divide in Northern Ireland which meant that the British army role had vastly different connotations for the two communities and the need for sensitivity to the implications of this. We saw the objective of restoring 'normality' (which had earlier been defined as the ultimate goal of their efforts) as underlining the importance of the primacy of the police, and mentioned the relevance of this issue to their desire for a general communications network embracing both army and police on both sides of the border. We stressed in particular the issue of harassment, which in the case of innocent people added to the support base of Sinn Fein and even in the case of known activists meant that the security forces were often acting out the script which Sinn Fein had written for them. They were very much in agreement with us on the importance of this issue and the need for vigilance on it.

6. The discussion threw up a number of sharp differences. General Waters said that the quality of cross-border cooperation varied "according to personalities" but when challenged was unable or unwilling to give any details. We questioned whether their emphasis on "hot pursuit" was not ignoring the point that terrorists, as in the case of those shot at Drumnakilly, were often locals who blended immediately into the background after an incident. They vehemently challenged this. Vehicles were a key element in almost all incidents and the likelihood of capture was directly proportionate to the speed of the response. However the sharpest difference was in relation to the UDR. We said that in spite of the professional zeal deployed in training etc, the antecedents, record and perception of the UDR were such as to evoke a deeply apprehensive response in the nationalist community, who saw again the spectre of reversion to the policy whereby one side of the sectarian divide was used to police and control the other. If the intention was to enhance the general acceptability of the security forces this was undoubtedly the most

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difficult possible path to that objective and we were at a loss to know why they seemed intent on taking it. General Waters characterised our comments on the problem of the UDR as "disobliging" and supported Brigadier Bray in the thesis that those who criticised the UDR were motivated by a partisan wish to see them fail. Irrespective of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, he said, Northern Ireland was part of the United Kingdom and British forces, including the UDR would be deployed in accordance with military necessity. The UDR had every right to defend the community against terrorism. We responded that irrespective of any constitutional considerations there were factors in Northern Ireland which made the situation completely different from that in Great Britain and to ignore these would prove not only bad political strategy but ultimately bad military strategy as well.

7. The meeting was on the whole useful since it afforded the possibility of a first-hand contact with of a group of people who obviously play an important role in shaping British policy. In spite of disagreements, which remained of course formally courteous, there were a number of points, in particular on the question of harassment, where we were able to bring home our concerns to them in a direct way. Our contact left us with a degree of unease, however: General Waters appeared a rather stiff and probably unimaginative officer with authoritarian attitudes well above the military average in such matters. To judge from his remarks, his instincts are likely to be simplistic and unionist, as well as being, predictably enough, militaristic. On a more general level one had a sense of a degree of specialisation emerging in British Army arrangements. There appears a shift in practice if not in theory to a dominant role for the Army in the border area, a concentration of effort by the regular army regiments in the other 'hot spots' such as West Belfast and East Tyrone and a reliance on the UDR permanent cadre as the normal military back-up in all the less troubled areas of Northern Ireland. This latter development is on one level a distancing mechanism in British terms. Its political and even recruitment and financial attractions for British planners are obvious. It could however also represent an incipient reversion to a policy of managing Northern Ireland by re delegating authority to the majority community, and should be watched for this reason as well as for the more obvious danger of sectarian incidents arising from any increase in the UDR role.

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