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cc Hickey + O'Donnell + Hickey

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6 January 1998

No of pages including this

To: HQ
To: Secretary Gallagher

From: Belfast
From: Joint Secretary

COPY TO
8/1/98
MR O'DONNELL
MR HICKEY
MR. BOUGHTON
~~MR. BOUGHTON~~
MR CALLAGHAN
~~MR. LARKIN~~

Subj: Secretary of State's meetings with parties (2)

1. Further to my earlier message, the following are some supplementary details on yesterday's meetings together with an initial read-out on today's.
2. The DUP meeting was "heavy going". Paisley made clear at the outset that he had responded to an invitation from the Secretary of State to discuss security matters but wished the meeting to be treated as distinct from all the others planned for the day (i.e., not part of the round with the other parties). McCrea did most of the talking. He dealt at length with the circumstances of the Wright murder, making obscure claims about collusion, about gates and turnstiles being left open and about the next of kin not being informed. He also claimed that the two INLA prisoners involved in the murder had been transferred to the Maze from Maghaberry and that they had previously been found to be in possession of weapons in a bid to murder Wright there. Paisley emphasised the concern of his grass-roots supporters about the deteriorating security situation and also claimed that the recent prisoner releases in the South had a destabilising effect.
3. Alliance (Alderdice) criticised the failure to make progress in the talks before Christmas and felt that consideration should be given to alternative approaches (not specified). On prisoner issues, Alderdice argued that all paramilitary prisoners should be treated as ordinary criminals and that there should be no special privileges. He warned that a dual system involving different regimes for different kinds of prisoners would not succeed.
4. Labour and the NIWC expressed general concern about the recent resumption of violence.

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5. // The Loyalist parties focussed almost exclusively on prisoner issues. They criticised the NIO for insufficient progress in this area and called for more Loyalist transfers from Britain to Northern Ireland.
6. Other points relating to the meetings with the Loyalist parties and the SDLP have been previously reported.
7. // This morning's meeting with Sinn Féin lasted for an hour. The mood was good, with Sinn Féin underlining their anxiety to press on with the talks. They asked the Secretary of State to impress on the UUP the need for direct engagement with Sinn Féin and the need to recognise "the march of time". They emphasised nationalist fears at the present time about reprisals from the Wright murder. Pointing out that all constituent elements of the CLMC have been involved at some time in the killing of Catholics, they claimed that the RUC have not been forthcoming in relation to evidence available to them of UVF and UDA involvement in such killings.
8. // The subsequent meeting with the UUP has been described to me as "rambling". On the political front, the UUP wanted to make early progress in a form of a four-way agreement between the SDLP, the two Governments and themselves on "heads of agreement". They wanted confidence-building measures to be kept within the talks process and, mentioning the recent prisoner releases in our jurisdiction, were critical of announcements of this kind being made outside it. They complained about the current Policing Bill, in particular the proposal to limit PANI's powers. On the Maze controversies, they were generally content with the decision to extend the remit of the review established by the Secretary of State. Finally, they were sharply critical of a decision (reported in today's Belfast Telegraph) that 50 police officers are to be made redundant.