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To: HQ
 To: Secretary Gallagher

From: Belfast
 From: Joint Secretary: Report (i) (SF536)
unred parades

Subj: Conversation with Ronnie Flanagan (2)

1. The following is a summary of exchanges which we had with the Chief Constable yesterday on the de-escalation agenda, the Crossmaglen issue, the Policing Commission, the current security situation and Sinn Féin.

De-escalation

2. We made a detailed case for urgent action by the security forces on the de-escalation agenda, not least with a view to improving the prospects for action by others on the decommissioning front.
3. Flanagan took this point without difficulty. He commented generally that some measures which he might wish to take have proven, on closer inspection, to be more problematic than expected. (He gave as an example the discovery that a proposal to dispense with a particular installation might require the dismantling of the phone communications centre for an entire region).
4. He told us, however, that he has plans to introduce a number of specific measures as soon as the election is out of the way (and prior to Drumcree). While he could not give us details at this stage, he dropped hints that the removal of RUC/Army patrols from city centres might be contemplated or the closure of certain installations. We will keep in close touch with him in this regard.
5. As for troop withdrawals, Flanagan recalled his own ultimate say in the overall numbers required to support the RUC and indicated that troop withdrawals once the

marching season is over (and on the assumption that the latter is not too problematic) are a distinct possibility. (Note: We will be discussing this issue in detail with the GOC, Sir Rupert Smith, when he comes to dinner in the Secretariat tomorrow evening).

6. Flanagan also referred to action already taken on the de-escalation agenda such as a 50% reduction in helicopter flights. He recognised, however, that such a reduction might not be perceptible to the people immediately affected (who would find even two flights a week no less irritating than fifty). He indicated his own involvement in the recent decision to replace helicopter transport for soldiers travelling to the Bessbrook base with road transport along the A25.

Crossmaglen

7. We made a strong case for the ending of the RUC/Army use of part of the grounds belonging to the Crossmaglen Rangers.
8. Flanagan responded that "this is a possibility", though he could not give us a timescale for when this might happen. He referred in general terms (though without the alarmist language favoured by the NIO when discussing this) to the continuing threat from dissident Republican groups. He also reiterated the point about the security forces using only a very small part of the Crossmaglen grounds and mentioned that there are liaison arrangements between the Army and the club on the timing of flights etc. We emphasised the importance of extremely sensitive handling of this issue by the security forces (not least in the context of encouraging GAA movement on the question of Rule 21).

Policing Commission

9. As with the Parades Commission, Flanagan claimed to have no particular interest in the composition of this body. He believes, in any event, that he should be keeping his distance from a body which will be investigating the RUC.
10. That said, he considers the Commission as it finally emerged to be both well-balanced

and offering a fair range of expertise. In contrast to other inquiries which he has encountered (he was particularly scathing about the Cumuraswamy report), this Commission seems likely to go about its work in a careful and constructive way, taking evidence from a wide range of people and commissioning useful research.

11. Flanagan has never met Chris Patten but is aware of his many virtues. (He also claimed not to have known that Patten is a Catholic - or that Peter Smith QC is associated with the UUP). As for Maurice Hayes, he presumed that membership of the Seanad implies some openness towards Irish nationalism. He has heard of Gerald Lynch from Commissioner Byrne (in the context of the McCabe scholarship scheme at John Jay College) but he does not know him.
12. Flanagan knows Cathy O'Toole from her involvement with a RUC seminar on domestic violence and found her impressive. He described as "a slur", however, media suggestions that she is on close terms with either the British Government or the RUC.
13. We explained the importance attached by our Government to a balanced membership which would attract support in the nationalist/Republican community as well as from Unionists. We also emphasised the importance of the Commission addressing its mandate in a serious and radical way and facing up to the need for fundamental reforms. In response, Flanagan recognised that "there has to be massive change". He mentioned, however, concerns among the RUC rank and file that policing reform might be treated as a sacrificial lamb to compensate Sinn Féin for their movement on key issues (accepting that there will be no Irish unity for the foreseeable future and agreeing to enter the Assembly). He also made clear that he would be opposed to former paramilitaries being recruited to the future police force.
14. Echoing points covered in a recent report by Ambassador Barrington, Flanagan made clear that he regards issues such as the RUC's name or the policing oath as essentially secondary. He is happy to let the people of Northern Ireland decide on the name for their police force. He also attaches no great importance to deleting a reference to the sovereign from the RUC oath.
15. What is of greater concern to him, he claimed, is how to improve the religious balance of the force. He recalled the initiative he had taken in setting up a working group to

consider the under-representation of both Catholics and women. He expects the Commission to focus in detail on such issues.

16. We brought up the question of the RUC's Internet website being made available in Irish. Flanagan said that, shortly after a proposal to this effect had been made to him by his community relations staff, he had an opportunity to discuss it with Gearoid O Caireallain, whom he met at the last Christmas reception in the Secretariat. He asked O Caireallain whether a move of this kind might come across as mere tokenism. The response was that it might appear to nationalists to be part of a "charm offensive" on the RUC's part and might not have the desired impact. Flanagan said that his failure so far to act on the proposal has been very largely conditioned by that conversation.
17. We commented that the proposal has merit from various points of view and suggested that broader soundings in the Irish language community might yield a more positive response to it. Flanagan said that, if we believed on the strength of such soundings that it should be proceeded with, he would be very happy to go ahead. We will keep in touch with him on this point.

Security situation

18. In a general review of the threat posed by dissident paramilitary groups, Flanagan was worried about an increasing role for the INLA but did not seem unduly concerned about the threat from the CAC or from the 32 Counties group. He recognised the capacity for such groups to gain access to IRA explosives and weapons but did not see this as a major problem at present.
19. As for the LVF, he described them as "absolute scum", an unscrupulous and ruthless outfit who will murder at will. He did not see their recently declared ceasefire as reflecting any genuine commitment to peace. It serves a temporary purpose (to buy time, he implied, for regrouping) but almost certainly will be breached with "deniable" murders.
20. The RUC now have better intelligence on the LVF and are keeping a number of suspects under close surveillance. This explains why they were able to pick up

suspects quite quickly in relation to the murder of Liam Conway last January. However, although they are morally certain that they got the right people, the evidence was not watertight from the DPP's perspective and they had to be released.

21. He mentioned in passing that the presence of LVF members some months ago in the vicinity of a Belfast hotel where the Taoiseach was at a meeting was, in the RUC's view, coincidental. The people concerned were making preparations for a kidnapping for fund-raising purposes.
22. Flanagan mentioned that RUC intelligence points to LVF preparations for a violent attack of some kind in the run-up to Drumcree.

Sinn Féin

23. Flanagan expressed some disappointment that, since their involvement in the talks process, Sinn Féin have not been pursuing the contacts which previously took place with the RUC at local level. He puts this down to an anxiety on their part not to compromise their demand at the talks for disbandment of the RUC. His own view is that this should not of itself rule out informal contact with the RUC.
24. He emphasised his own availability for dialogue with Sinn Féin, suggesting as an example that it might have been useful to discuss with them who they would like to have seen on the Policing Commission.
25. He mentioned, finally, an amusing encounter with Adams and McGuinness at a recent US Consulate party in honour of George Mitchell. When the Senator greeted both warmly and asked when they might be free for a chat, McGuinness turned with a grin to Flanagan, who was just behind them, and said that "Ronnie there will have a complete account of our movements and can tell you". Flanagan responded with a jocular complaint to the effect that he was not entirely up to speed on their programme and would appreciate a full briefing.