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FROM: MARTIN HOWARD
PS/SECRETARY OF STATE
10 JULY 1996

- cc PS/Secretary of State (L) - B
- PS/Sir John Wheeler (B&L) - B
- PS/Michael Ancram (B&L) - B
- PS/PUS (B&L) - B
- PS/Mr D Fell - B
- Mr Thomas (B&L) - B
- Mr Legge - B
- Mr Ray - B
- Mr Leach (B&L) - B
- Mr Perry - B
- Mr Stephens - B
- Mr Hill (B&L) - B
- Mr Budd, Cabinet Office
- Mr Holmes, 10 Downing Street

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ph...*

Mr Steele - 6

DRUMCREE: SECRETARY OF STATE'S DISCUSSION WITH CHIEF CONSTABLE

The Chief Constable, accompanied by Ronnie Flanagan, Tim Lewis and Brigadier Strudely met the Secretary of State in Stormont Castle this morning, 9 July, to discuss the current security situation in Northern Ireland. You and I were also present.

The Secretary of State that there was no sign of a working rise in
The Chief Constable opened by saying that the situation was clearly extremely serious. The Police were stretched and things were not going to get any easier. On the other hand, it was clear that the UDA was currently trying to avoid getting involved in violence. The UVF on the other hand was in state of some tension as a result of differences between Billy Wright and Bunter Graham. There was no sign of any compromise between the local Orange lodge and the Garvaghy Road residents. Brendan McKenna, who led the latter, did not feel under any pressure and indeed the spate of forcible evictions of Catholic families had merely strengthened his hand. Trimble and his colleagues were simply falling in to the Republican trap.

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The Chief Constable had been very concerned that the airport had been closed and he had made it clear that it must be kept open come what may, as should the port at Larne. He would like to take a stronger line against the blockades but he was faced with a very clever strategy whereby the "gougers" get the Police busy at night and then more responsible people manned blockades during the day. All this meant that there was no respite for the Police and no opportunity for rest. There was also considerable risk in direct physical conflict with the Orange Order with unknown conclusion. His confusion was that additional resources would be needed, which inevitably would primarily have to be military.

Continuing, the Chief Constable said that the situation might run on to 12 July and then peter out afterwards; or it could run on after that. He was dismayed to see the quiet satisfaction and triumphalism of some MPs who were the same individuals who were attacking him personally for the decision he had taken. He was clear that there would have been trouble whatever decision he had taken. That decision had, in any case, been backed by all his senior staff. We could not get into the situation where we policed only by the consent of the Orange order.

The Secretary of State that there was no point in wasting time in reviewing past decisions. He had made it clear that he would back the Chief Constable in his decision and had said as much as to Trimble, Paisley and Smyth. The Prime Minister would do the same when he saw them later that day. He was clear that the only way of solving this problem was a resolution of the situation at Drumcree and that was what we needed to encourage. Trimble was clearly a shaken man and was aware of the damage that had been done. This went beyond Drumcree including into the Talks process itself, although Trimble had said to him that he wanted the Talks to continue even if the Unionists would not be there for the moment. It was important that the RUC prevail in this particular situation and he had been particularly concerned to see that for several hours the previous night the airport had been closed.

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The Chief Constable agreed that events at the airport had been alarming. A crowd had built up from almost nothing to 3,000 very quickly and it had taken some time to deploy the necessary resources. If the situation continued for any length of time or threatened to get worse it might have been necessary to consider blocking routes from Drumcree and other target areas. This could only effectively be done by bringing whole areas of Northern Ireland to a complete stop. In the case of Drumcree it did not seem necessary to take that sort of extreme action unless numbers rose to 20 or 30,000 compared with the 5,000 currently present. His main immediate concern was the diversionary tactics which were stretching the Police resources who were at full stretch across the Province.

At this point Mr Flanagan joined the meeting to report on his latest contacts in and around Portadown. He said that Brendan McKenna was not in a mood to talk and would be very unlikely to be a party to any parade going down the Garvaghy Road. The Orange order would not consider any alternative route, but would be prepared to go down the Garvaghy Road on the same basis as last year. The Secretary of State repeated that we could not capitulate to the Orange Order. The decision not to allow the march down the Garvaghy Road had been taken partly on the basis that there was a strong chance that it could not be achieved. The consequences of failure are no less if it were at the hands of the Orange Order.

The Chief Constable said that one of his principal concerns was to control the sectarian interfaces in Belfast which had been the subject of marches by local Orange organisations last night. Problems had arisen where the Orange marchers themselves had dispersed peacefully but left some of the more thuggish hangers-on to cause trouble with the local population. He clearly needed to cover both Drumcree and Belfast but also needed resources to ensure that roads were kept open. He anticipated having to use more Army personnel and to move from the current softly, softly approach to a more robust one. He recognised the dangers of escalation and said what was really needed was for the leaders of the Orange Order and the Ulster Unionists to condemn what was taking place.

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Mr Flanagan said that one possible area of compromise had emerged but had disappeared again. This revolved around a group of county grand masters who were trying to think of ways of stimulating a judicial review which both sides could comply with. This, however, had evaporated when they made contact with Jeffrey Donaldson who had been surprisingly hard line in his attitude. There was now the prospect of the main demonstration on 12 July would take place in Portadown and with the possibility of 100,000 Orangemen and others at and around Drumcree.

The Secretary of State asked about military reinforcements. Brigadier Strudely said that the battalions in Northern Ireland were rapidly being brought up to strength and an additional two companies' worth of soldiers would be available for the weekend. The third roulement battalion would be returning to Northern Ireland but this could not be before the weekend. Some 17 companies had been deployed the previous night on civil disorder duty. In accordance with current policy, the GOC was avoiding the deployment of Royal Irish battalions in civil disorder duties. The Chief Constable confirmed that he needed the extra battalion and was also considering the possibility of mutual aid from other police forces to deal with security set pieces.

The Secretary of State asked how much the Chief Constable actually needed and whether we needed to look at resources beyond the third battalion allocated to Northern Ireland. The Brigadier raised the possibility of deploying the Spearhead battalion. Mr Flanagan said that in his view both of these additional units were required. The Secretary of State asked whether there was a case for seeking deployment of yet another battalion. The Chief Constable and the Brigadier said they would like more time to think about this particular proposal. The Brigadier made the point that preparation was as important as numbers and throwing untrained troops into this particular situation could be counter-productive. They both agreed, however, that in seeking deployment of the third roulement battalion and the Spearhead battalion, the possibility of a requirement for a third major unit should be flagged up.

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The Secretary of State asked whether there was a reasonable prospect that the RUC could prevail in these circumstances. The Chief Constable said that he could not say for certain. One of his principal worries was threats were being received by individual RUC officers and their families from loyalists. It was difficult to see beyond the weekend. Mr Lewis said that in the immediate short term his primary concern was how to deal with what were likely to be massive disturbances on 11/12 July. If the police and the Army were to be able to deal with that, they needed to conserve their energies in the meantime. That might point to a less robust approach over the next 24 or 48 hours. Reverting to the question of keeping the airport open, Mr Flanagan reported, from his conversation with David Trimble last night, that Trimble and Donaldson had recognised that blocking the airport road had been a bad idea presentationally, but had been unable to persuade those concerned to lift the block.

The Secretary of State summarised by saying that the Chief Constable was clear that he could not guarantee the RUC would prevail. On the other hand the implications were very grave if we had to capitulate to the Orange order. Accordingly, the only viable policy in security terms was to maximise the resources available to the Chief Constable. That meant the early deployment of the third battalion which was already on its way; and deployment of the Spearhead battalion. We should also flag up the prospect of yet another battalion being required if circumstances warranted it. Brigadier Strudely undertook to process this through HQNI and the MOD.

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