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cc FAIRPS



MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

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SECRETARY OF STATE

MO 19/3H

cc JP
VAC

- uncomfortable, ~~that~~
~~has~~ given the delay
 before the 1994 rounds
 were withdrawn, but I

think this honest approach

is probably best. The only
 question in my mind is whether
 we should flag the issue up

so much by giving a Ministerial
 press briefing (see X) ??

file
 PB 10/6
 6 June 1997

Philip 6/6

Dear Philip,

NORTHERN IRELAND/PLASTIC BATON ROUNDS

The Secretary of State for Defence believes colleagues will wish to be aware of a problem which has arisen with part of the stock of plastic baton rounds approved for use by the Security Forces in Northern Ireland. A significant proportion of rounds (up to a third) manufactured in 1994 have been found to have muzzle velocities in excess of the upper limit in the equipment specification. The maximum excess so far recorded is 8% but is generally of the order of 3%. All the 1994 rounds have now been withdrawn from operational use and replaced by others which do conform to specification.

Having discussed the matter with the Northern Ireland Secretary, the Secretary of State considers that we should make this information public as openly and as early as possible. I enclose the draft of a Written Question and Answer which, subject to his consideration of the text over the weekend, he considers should be given by the Minister of State for Defence Procurement, and repeated in the Commons, on Tuesday 10 June. With the Northern Ireland Secretary's agreement, the Defence Secretary proposes that the Answer should be complemented by a simultaneous Press briefing by Lord Gilbert and Mr Ingram. Our Press Office is in touch separately with yours about the arrangements for this.

The shortcomings of the 1994 rounds were first reported in January 1996 following tests in the previous year. No action was taken to withdraw the rounds at that time because the MOD technical staffs concerned, supported by medical opinion in the report, considered the velocity increase to be operationally insignificant and the tests as inconclusive. It was not until earlier this year, following further tests in 1996, that the findings became more widely available within MOD, and available to the other Departments concerned, at which stage a better

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appreciation of the problem, including the political dimension, was made, leading to the withdrawal of the 1994 rounds.

These rounds are being tested further and the reason for the excessive muzzle velocities is not yet clear. On the basis of the tests so far, informal medical advice is that the excesses are not such as to be likely to have a significant effect on the incidence or the severity of injuries caused by baton rounds. Nevertheless, given the history of the use of baton rounds in Northern Ireland, the public disclosure of the shortcomings of the 1994 batches is quite likely to raise wider questions about the use of this equipment in the maintenance of law and order. There are also implications for claims for compensation by those allegedly injured by baton rounds. These issues, together with others such as the continuing operational requirement for baton rounds and the future development programme, are covered in the enclosed Q & A material which, in consultation with the NIO, we have drawn up in support of the proposed Press briefing.

I am sending copies of this letter and the enclosures to the Private Secretaries of members of IN, to the Private Secretary to the Minister Without Portfolio, and to Jan Polley.

(M A VENABLES)
Private Secretary

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