



From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

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Prime Minister

Background to you 19 November 1997
meeting with me tomorrow, and
with them on Friday. The

Dear John

removal of a para battalion
has leaked tonight. The Unionist will
complain but a balance this is a
good move at present.
JH
19/11

Your letter of 13 November asked for advice on whether more could be done to reduce the security presence, or at least its visibility in some areas, in the context of comments made by the SDLP, the Irish and others in meetings with the Prime Minister.

The SDLP mentioned two points in particular: the level of Army patrolling and the observation towers in South Armagh. On the first, the degree of military support needed by the RUC to perform their policing function is a matter for the operational judgement of the Chief Constable, and is based on the assessed threat. Our current assessment of the threat is attached at Annex A; in brief, INLA, the CAC and (on the loyalist side) the LVF remain committed to mounting attacks, while there are clear tensions within the IRA over the ceasefire strategy, and the long-term direction of the movement remains unclear, particularly in view of the resumption of IRA operational activities (targeting, etc).

Within the parameters of this continuing threat, the security forces have responded positively to the ceasefires, and the Chief Constable and GOC recognise that it is essential to adopt a pro-active approach to maintain momentum and minimise accusations of foot-dragging. Thus, military tasking in support of the RUC has decreased by about one-third overall since the ceasefire, and in areas such as the city centres of Belfast, Londonderry and Newry the RUC operate without any military support. In many - though not all - nationalist

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areas, military activity is significantly down on pre-ceasefire levels. (Fermanagh and some other Border areas, where the CAC pose a significant threat, are exceptions.)

In view of these reduced taskings, it is now possible to return to England a battalion of the Parachute Regiment previously relocated from North Belfast. It may leave as early as Friday, two months before its planned departure date, and (unless the security situation worsens) will not be replaced. The visual impact of troops boarding aircraft to leave Northern Ireland will offer clear proof that levels of security activity have decreased. Depending on developments, there may be scope for further troop reductions before Christmas.

Several other measures are in the pipeline. The Army have already announced their intention to close the military base in Kilkeel, Co Down. Formal action has been started to close another base in Castlederg, Co Tyrone. A particularly striking measure will be the removal of security furniture from a road checkpoint outside Newry, on the main Belfast to Dublin road. And the road closure around an RUC station in the centre of Londonderry will be lifted. The logistics and handling of these further steps are now being co-ordinated.

We are also getting the message across in the media that significant levels of de-escalation have taken place. On Saturday (15 November) the Belfast Telegraph carried a front page story detailing the level of change that has taken place during the ceasefire. (It is worth noting that the contrast between this and the weekend comments by Sinn Fein's Francis Molloy that "negotiation is simply another phase in that struggle ... negotiations may fall apart ... then we simply go back to what we know best" was not lost on unionists, who have strongly criticised several de-escalatory moves as being driven by nationalist lobbying rather than objective security assessments.)

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On observation towers, the changes sought by the SDLP simply cannot be delivered at this time. A detailed explanation of the role of the towers is at Annex B. Their presence underpins all security force activity in that most difficult area. Without them, the RUC's ability to perform their normal day-to-day tasks would be seriously impaired. The towers have a relatively small impact on everyday life in South Armagh, but a big one on the IRA's scope to operate there; and IRA members are heavily involved in the campaign to remove them.

The Chief Constable and GOC have examined the options carefully this week in the light of the Prime Minister's request. They believe that it would not be possible at the moment to justify moving beyond the position set out in this letter. However, the situation will be kept under very close review, and further initiatives taken as soon as the threat allows.

Finally, since de-escalation may well be raised when the Prime Minister sees the Taoiseach in Luxembourg, I attach at Annex C some points to make he may wish to use.

I am copying this to John Grant (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Tom McKane (Ministry of Defence), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Christopher Meyer (Washington), Veronica Sutherland (Dublin) and Mike Venables (Ministry of Defence).

Yours ever

PAUL WILKINSON
 Private Secretary to Adam Ingram JP MP