

The International Body

Meeting with Representatives of the Garda (the Irish police force)
December 18, 1995
Dublin

Participants: Commissioner Patrick Culligan, Deputy Commissioner Patrick Byrne

Summary

Representatives of the Garda said Adams and McGuinness could not deliver on decommissioning as a precondition to all-party talks because other senior IRA leaders would block them; some political movement is necessary soon to prevent the hardliners from gaining the upper hand within the IRA; The IRA could replenish its weapons stocks with ease. Sinn Fin and the IRA are synonymous in terms of membership; McGuinness remains the strongest IRA man, north and south, responsible for many killings, but a man of his word; there are 400 IRA activists in the south and 600-800 in the north; the southern command provides logistical support and manufactures weapons; the IRA quartermaster in Dundalk is opposed to the ceasefire; Republican Sinn Fein and its associated 30- man INRA oppose the ceasefire but have been checked to date; the INLA, composed of thugs cast out by other paramilitaries is effectively controlled by the IRA.

End Summary

Account of Meeting

Culligan reviewed the history of IRA arms procurement. In 1951 the Army Council authorized raids on public arsenals. A new campaign began in 1969, following the six year campaign begun in 1956. The U.S. has been a high priority source of weapons. 100-150 rifles remain from a 1977 U.S. shipment for example.

The ratio of stocks in the Republic and in Northern Ireland may not be exactly 80% to 20%, but estimates are based on actual discoveries of troves of weapons. Most of the discoveries have been in the border counties but it is known that "mother dumps" are located further from the border. Patrolling Ireland's lengthy coastline is impossible.

Byrne noted that the principal role of the southern command of the IRA is logistical support. The south also takes the lead in the construction of weapons. The southern command is currently based in Dublin. The northern command consists of Northern Ireland and the six border counties of the Republic. Culligan said the quartermaster of the IRA (strongly opposed to the ceasefire) lives in Dundalk.

Our estimates of IRA weapons holdings roughly correspond with those of the RUC, Culligan continued. Cooperation with the RUC is close and effective. The IRA probably has 400 activists in the south, with 200 as key performers, while there are between 600-800 in the north. Membership in the south is probably declining and recruitment there has stopped since the ceasefire. The age profile of the IRA is rising. There are some members in their twenties but the majority is forty plus and all of the leaders are in their mid-to-late forties. Sinn Fein and the IRA are synonymous. Adams, McGuinness, and Pat Doherty all have been top people and are still in the IRA. McGuinness may have distanced himself from the military council for tactical reasons but he is still the strongest IRA person, north and south.

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Culligan said that Adams and McGuinness may wish to turn over weapons but they cannot because of opposition within the IRA to such a move. Other senior leaders would block a weapons handover. We have never seen a weapons "surrender" as a "runner."

Culligan said the Garda depends on the RUC to keep tabs on the loyalist paramilitaries. The loyalists really have not been a problem in the south and have made very few organized incursions. The IRA does not target Garda officers, but have killed some of our people as we have tried to stymie their operations. IRA activists feel safer in the Republic, but in practice, we hound them and have had serious successes in seizing weapons. Membership in the IRA is a criminal offense in the Republic, but there are few convictions because membership is difficult to prove in a court of law. Unless an IRA activist is caught in the commission of an illegal act, corroboration of membership (for a long time, the judgment of a chief superintendant of the Garda was theoretically sufficient to obtain a conviction on the basis of IRA membership alone) is difficult and incarceration on that basis alone would be perilously close to internment.

Byrne said that over the years Adams and McGuinness have put people in place sympathetic to their political line and loyal personally to them, but hardliners remain in the organization. From where we sit, political movement in the near future is imperative to thwart the hardliners. Setting decommissioning as a precondition to the next political step is off the mark and will not work. A turn-in of weapons would be seen as a surrender. The republicans believe that, in laying down their arms they have made the ultimate concession.

Culligan said the IRA would have no difficulty replenishing its stocks even if it gave up everything in its inventory now. The IRA has an excellent engineering unit that can make any type of bomb imaginable. The IRA's five goals remain the same: sovereignty over all of Ireland, the establishment of an Irish socialist republic, setting up a lawful government over all of Ireland, equal rights for all citizens, and the promotion of Irish as the official mode of communication throughout the island. These goals are to be achieved through force of arms, the organization in Ireland of a fighting force to accomplish these aims, and provision of assistance to all who espouse the cause. Over the years Sinn Fein has established bases, especially in deprived urban areas.

Culligan said a phased reduction of arms would be unacceptable to Sinn Fein/IRA as a precondition, but perhaps could be acceptable under certain conditions. Byrne thought a phased reduction might offer a way forward as a major topic for political talks and as a way to put the ball in Sinn Fein's court. If the IRA decided to hand in weapons, Culligan said, it would more likely deposit them with the Garda or to an organization such as the International Body than with the British government. The mechanics of a turn-in would not be difficult once a political decision to do so were reached.

Byrne said Republican Sinn Fein (associated with the INRA -- Irish National Revolutionary Army-- with 30 members) is committed to a campaign of violence and hopes there will be no political progress. We have been successful in containing Republican Sinn Fein. The INLA -- Irish National Liberation Army -- is a bunch of thugs cast aside by more "respectable" paramilitary organizations. Culligan said the IRA has the INLA under control but not the INRA. Byrne said Republican Sinn Fein is cautious, waiting for something it can take advantage of.

Byrne emphasized that anything Sinn Fein does must be sanctioned by the IRA military council. He recalled the final scene of the Godfather in describing McGuinness. McGuinness, like Michael Collins seventy years before him, is cold and calculating, responsible for many deaths, but a man of his word.