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PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON

17-18 DECEMBER 1979

NORTHERN IRELAND (INCLUDING ARMS FOR RUC)

Brief by Northern Ireland Office

POINTS TO MAKE

1. US Administration's unequivocal condemnation of violence and practical steps to prevent US assistance to IRA terrorists are very welcome. But the refusal of the Administration to allow the RUC to buy weapons from US manufacturers is a most serious issue.

Political development

2. HMG determined to make political progress by moving away from direct rule and giving people of Northern Ireland more responsibility for own affairs. This movement desired on all sides; but wide differences remain over nature of any new arrangements. This is essence of the problem: we are willing to proceed with any one of wide range of possibilities, but any new system of government must be acceptable to both sides of community to work.

3. Working Paper, recently published and well received by most, paves way for a Conference at which we shall seek highest level of agreement between parties before we put our proposals to Parliament. Concerned only with a form of government for Northern Ireland within the existing relationship with the United Kingdom. Not concerned with long-term constitutional issues such as Irish unity, on which clearly no prospect of agreement. Internal government the place to start. During recent visit to US, Mr Lynch accepted this notwithstanding his desire for eventual Irish unity: we expect any successor to take broadly similar line, but may encourage "republicans" in North to be more strident.

Arms for RUC

4. Grave consequences if Administration continues to withhold export licences for arms for RUC:
- a. practical, for RUC. These replacement revolvers are needed for self-protection against terrorists. No adequate non-American alternative available in the foreseeable future. One-third of initial order already honoured. Second tranche due early 1980 (and final tranche not until 1981);
  - b. Get facts straight: RUC is a lawfully constituted police force with same status as any other police force in U.K., Europe or U.S.A. Non-sectarian. Professional. IRA is terrorist organisation with international terrorist connections aiming to destroy Government in North and South. Republic of Ireland recognises this: Gardai and RUC work together against common enemy.

- c. Outrage and bafflement in UK Parliament and country that ally should ban arms for a legitimate police force as if it were murderous terrorist organisation.
- d. Especially strong reaction in Northern Ireland. Unionists will exploit situation. Prospects of political initiative jeopardised;
- e. Will be a major IRA propaganda victory, heartening NORAIID, INC and all republican sympathisers and waverers.
- f. Not just practical matter of arms supply; the issue is moral and strategic overtones. We cannot compromise. If Administration's answer is negative, PM has no option but to react strongly and publicly, both while in US and on return home. Major repercussions on Anglo/US relations.

5. Appreciate President's political constraints. But terrorism is an international phenomenon and needs to be fought wherever it appears. British public will not understand how US Administration can actually obstruct that fight in NI while looking for British support in other places.

## BACKGROUND NOTES

### A. Arms for RUC

1. Because of the terrorist threat, members of the RUC are each issued with self-protection weapons, currently the Walther 9mm semi-automatic pistol. In 1978, following exhaustive tests on 11 personal protection weapons, it was decided that the replacement should be 9000 US-manufactured Ruger Magnum revolvers. No suitable alternative weapons are available in sufficient quantities from sources outside the US. A British firm, Sterling, have a revolver at the design stage but it cannot yet be evaluated; a French firm produce a revolver, but only in small quantities and at great cost. The first of 3 equal tranches of Rugers was ordered through a GB agent in September 1978. After a little delay the State Department licensed the export of these weapons and they were delivered (together with certain other weapons) in March/April 1979.

2. Following critical articles in the US press, Speaker O'Neill of the House of Representatives vigorously attacked the State Department for issuing export licences for the sale of arms to the RUC. Consequently, in July, Secretary of State Vance agreed that the State Department would conduct a review of the policy and procedures for the export of arms to the RUC. Meanwhile further export licences would be withheld. Thereupon the Police Authority for Northern Ireland, which was engaged in negotiations over the price of the second tranche, decided, in consultation with the Government to withhold the order for that tranche until the matter was settled.

