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Prime Minister

①

13 February 1981

Agree, subject to views of
Foreign & Commonwealth Secretary,

Dear Michael,

the line is the final paragraph

Yes not
RMB 13/6

FIREARMS FOR THE RUC

The Prime Minister will be meeting President Reagan shortly. You will remember that under his predecessor approval was withheld for the export of Ruger pistols to the RUC. Despite the American ban imposed in 1979, the RUC have continued to receive from their UK suppliers small numbers of Rugers, adding up so far to a total of 1,300 of the 3,000 on order (in addition to the 3,000 already supplied under an earlier export licence). We have taken care not to press the suppliers to tell us where they are getting the guns from, but at least some must be coming direct from the American manufacturers. We have avoided embarrassing the American authorities by raising this with them.

Against this background, and bearing in mind that it is now 2½ years since the first decisions were taken on Rugers, my Secretary of State has commissioned a fresh assessment of the RUC's requirement. The RUC's considered view is that the Ruger has shown itself in practice to be as valuable as expected. It has, however, proved to be too bulky for use in some circumstances, and the Chief Constable would prefer to retain the (slimmer) existing Walther automatics for use by personnel in plain clothes, or in other circumstances where it is desirable to conceal the firearm. In the Chief Constable's considered view, the RUC's needs will be met by a supply of 6,000 Ruger revolvers - as opposed to the 9,000 originally envisaged. My Secretary of State sees no reason to dispute this assessment, and believes that it reflects accurately the improving security situation.

The last 3,000 guns have not yet been formally ordered, and there will now be no need to do so. We still need the 1,700 Rugers which are

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outstanding from the current order, but believe that these will be supplied in the same way as the last 1,300 guns. If there is any shortfall, the Chief Constable believes that the (British) Sterling Magnum revolver (only very recently made available to the RUC for testing) could be an adequate substitute. There is therefore no longer any operational need to press the Americans to grant formally export licences for weapons for the RUC.

There remains the political angle. There has been press speculation that President Reagan will be willing to grant export licences, and the Prime Minister may well be pressed on this issue on her return from Washington. For HMG the best position is for the Americans to lift the ban and for the Prime Minister to be able to say that this has happened. But there is good evidence that Speaker O'Neill remains as deeply opposed as ever, and the assessment of HM Ambassador in Washington is that despite the President's instinctive sympathy for our anti-terrorist effort, instance on our part in reopening the issue might well make it more difficult to gain wider understanding by the US public of our Northern Ireland policies. The point could, if the Prime Minister agrees, be explored further with the State Department before her visit; but if, as we expect, the Americans are reluctant to lift the ban the best approach then seems to be for the Prime Minister to raise the matter briefly and formally with the President with a view to being able to say on her return that she had discussed the subject with the President; that the Chief Constable has advised the Government that the RUC now has sufficient appropriate weapons to satisfy its principal requirements; and that President Reagan has been told this. If necessary it could be added that the Government sees the British-made Sterling Magnum revolver as a candidate for any further revolver supplies required by the RUC; that reflecting the improved security situation the operational requirement has reduced; and that since the ban was imposed the RUC have been able to purchase additional weapons from other sources.

If the Prime Minister and the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary agree,

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the FCO could instruct the Embassy in Washington:

(a) to explore now the prospects of the Americans lifting their ban; if the State Department indicate that the administration is unlikely to agree to this, then the Embassy should,

(b) put to them the proposition that the Prime Minister should raise the matter briefly with President Reagan, with a view to afterwards being able to answer questions at home on the above lines.

These developments will be reflected in the brief for the Prime Minister's visit to Washington.

I am sending copies of this letter to the private secretaries to members of OD, and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours ever,

R. A. Harrington

R A HARRINGTON
Private Secretary

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