

PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING ON SECURITY -  
2.50 PM ON 24 DECEMBER 1979 AT STORMONT CASTLE

Present: Prime Minister<sup>x</sup>.  
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland  
Mr Stowe  
Sir Maurice Oldfield  
Mr Hannigan  
Mr Ingham  
Mr Whitmore  
Mr Harrington  
General Officer Commanding Northern Ireland  
Chief Constable (designate) RUC  
Lt Col M Ashmore  
Supt H McMorris

1. Sir Maurice Oldfield and the Chief Constable explained to the Prime Minister the difficulties faced in gathering intelligence. Information was needed from south of the border and from the heart of the Catholic community and was very difficult to obtain. What intelligence was available tended to come through the RUC. In rural areas, strangers were readily identified. The first task of the police must be to re-establish local contact and slowly to win back the support of the community in the difficult areas. The terrorists - mainly PIRA - were increasingly professional. While information about particular crimes became available quite frequently, it often fell short of being evidence capable of use in court. The co-operation of the Garda was urgently needed to establish an acceptable presence on both sides of the border. This would require hard work in the sparsely populated and hence very difficult areas.

2. The Prime Minister enquired about the extent of co-operation with the Garda. The Chief Constable told her that it had definitely improved. It was not yet at the level which he would want in respect of specific incidents, partly because the Garda lacked the skill to gain the necessary information where they were willing to pass it on. This inevitably hampered the work of the security forces: as the GOC explained, the Army needed more information to operate with maximum effectiveness.



3. Sir Maurice Oldfield pointed out that the action by the Government would help to make confidence grow which would enable the population to assist. Even so, evidence would always be difficult to obtain, and would require detailed time-consuming work necessitating a high standard of training for those involved.
4. The Prime Minister asked whether enough research was being done to protect against bombs. The GOC replied that counter measures against radio-controlled devices, enabling them to be jammed or detonated when safe, was the top research priority.
5. Sir Maurice Oldfield emphasised the importance of using the existing law to the best effect. There had been examples of occasions where applications for bail had been successful where they should not have been. Action was in hand to strengthen the RUC legal team, and there might well be a case for some changes in the law.
6. The Chief Constable mentioned that it now seemed clear that the Republic would be taking action under the extra territorial legislation to prosecute O'Hare for a murder in Keady. There were two other cases of attempted murder where the evidence was very strong and where the Republic ought to be able to proceed.
7. The Prime Minister asked whether, in view of the vulnerability of posts such as that in Newtownhamilton, it would matter if they were abandoned. The GOC replied that the Army would prefer to be further back, but their presence was essential to protect RUC stations in such areas. The Police in such places were inevitably isolated from the community and could thus be of only limited effectiveness, but the fact remained that if the security forces were to withdraw the vacuum would merely be filled by terrorists. The waste in manpower had to be accepted on those grounds. There were other ways in which manpower could be saved: the new base at Whiterock, which in effect would replace two and a half bases, would save substantial manpower on static tasks.



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8. The Chief Constable emphasised that Forkhill and the area around it was probably unique in the difficulties for the security forces. There was considerably improved co-operation with the Garda, for example, in the west of the province, but it would take a long time to make a real impression on the black spots, mainly Belfast, Derry and South Armagh - the latter being by far the worst.

9. The Prime Minister asked whether there were any subsidies on border towns which could be used to affect the co-operation of the population. The Secretary of State replied that there were none which applied differentially towards border areas.

10. The meeting concluded after about 35 minutes.

*R. A. Harrington*

R A HARRINGTON  
Private Secretary

2 January 1979

Distribution:

Officials present

Mr Marshall

Mr Burns

Mr Buxton

Mr Davenport

Lt Col Ashmore

Supt H McMorris

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