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cc Master set

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

7 July 1980

Meeting with the Fermanagh Widows

The four widows from Fermanagh, Mrs. Kernaghan, Mrs. Howe, Mrs. Morrow and Mrs. Latimer, called on the Prime Minister as arranged this afternoon. Dr. Paisley did not put in an appearance.

Most of the discussion, which on occasions was predictably emotional, was of a personal nature. But the widows, whose principal spokesman was Mrs. Howe, took the opportunity to make a number of substantive points. They said that it was clear to them that while the murders in their area were carried out by gunmen from the Republic, the planning was done by local residents. As a result relations between the Protestant and Catholic communities were deteriorating. If the Government were unable to do anything, it was inevitable that the local residents would take the law into their own hands. Mrs. Howe said in terms that she for one would not care if retaliation took place. The widows were not persuaded that there had been any improvement in cross-border co-operation since Mr. Haughey had come to power. They knew of members of the Garda who openly admitted to drinking with the IRA in public houses and to being unable to arrest those members of the IRA because they did not have the authority to do so from Dublin. When the Prime Minister referred to the difficulties of getting evidence that could be used in court, Mrs. Howe said that if the authorities waited until they had such evidence, the rest of the husbands still living in South Fermanagh would be dead first. She had welcomed Mrs. Thatcher's election victory because she had thought that it would result in a tightening up of the security situation in the six counties. She had been disappointed.

The widows also complained about the compensation they received for the deaths of their husbands. They contrasted what they were likely to receive with the £5,000 awarded to Mr. Bernard O'Connor by the High Court recently (I enclose a press cutting given to the Prime Minister by Mrs. Howe). They considered that Mr. O'Connor had got his money very cheaply and that many similar claims would follow.

/Asked

Asked by the Prime Minister what they thought should be done, the widows replied that the main things were the permanent closing of minor roads (they said that there were at least twenty-three that should be blocked); the maintenance of proper security on the main roads; and the real implementation of extradition arrangements from the Republic. A more detailed point raised by Mrs. Howe was that the local police should have permission to search buildings in the area on their own authority and without having to wait for search warrants. By the time they had got authority to make searches, it was usually too late.

As forecast the widows also left a large number of letters from the inhabitants of Fermanagh addressed to the Prime Minister. We shall open these here and I will forward to you any that are of interest. Subject to your views, we do not propose to acknowledge the letters.

I should be grateful if you could let me have the addresses of the four widows. The Prime Minister would like to make some further gesture of sympathy in due course. She would like to invite the families to some occasion such as the Trooping of the Colour, in London. If you see any objection to this perhaps you would let me know. There may be a problem over the fares of the families since at least one of the widows claimed that she would not be able to afford to come to London if she had to pay for herself and her children.

I should be grateful if you could let me have a detailed commentary on the suggestions made by the widows for action. It would be helpful if you could include an analysis of just how and with what concrete results cross border co-operation has improved since Mr. Haughey came to power. The Prime Minister has taken careful note of what the widows had to say.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Paul Lever (Foreign and Commonwealth Office).

M. O'D. B. ALEXANDER

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Northern Ireland Office.

NM