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Defensive Brief D

MEETING BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE TAOISEACH

FRIDAY 5 APRIL 1974

ARMY PLAIN CLOTHES PATROLS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Plain clothes teams, initially joint RUC/Army patrols, have operated in Northern Ireland since the IRA bombing campaign in Easter 1971. Later in 1971 the teams were reformed and expanded as Military Reaction Forces (MRFs) without RUC participation. In 1972 the operations of the MRF were brought under more centralised control and a higher standard of training achieved by establishing a Special Reconnaissance Unit (SRU) of 130 all ranks under direct command of HQNI.

2. The term "Special Reconnaissance Unit" and the details of its organisation and mode of operations have been kept secret. The SRU operates in Northern Ireland at present under the cover name "Northern Ireland Training and Advisory Teams (Northern Ireland)" - NITAT(NI) - ostensibly the equivalent of genuine NITAT teams in UKLF and BAOR.

3. The prime task of the SRU is to conduct covert surveillance of terrorists as a preliminary to an arrest carried out by security forces in uniform. The SRU may also be used to contact and handle agents or informers and for the surveillance and protection of persons or property under terrorist threat. The SRU works to a great extent on Special Branch information and the Special Branch have a high regard for it.

4. Men who have served with the SAS are serving in the SRU but no SAS units are operating in Northern Ireland. One officer and 30 soldiers serving with the SRU since early January are due to resume service with 22 SAS by 7 April. Their presence with the SRU went undetected until the Robert Fisk

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article in "The Times" on 19 March.

5. What do the Irish Government know about plain clothes patrols and SAS involvement?

The statement at Annex A, which was prepared by the Ministry of Defence in consultation with the Northern Ireland Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was handed to the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin. In answering a question in the Dail on whether he would protest to the British Government against the use of the SAS in Northern Ireland, Dr Fitzgerald said that he had no suggestion that SAS troops were operating in Northern Ireland.

6. Line to take

Plain clothes patrols are a perfectly legitimate activity for the Army in Northern Ireland and their existence has been public knowledge for a long time. Nobody who wishes to see an end to the violence could wish to deny the Army the use of any effective means of defeating terrorism by the imposition of unreasonable constraints on a legitimate mode of operation.

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It has been alleged from time to time that murders and other major crimes committed in Northern Ireland have been the work of the SAS. Clearly the terrorist organisations have found it convenient to encourage this belief as a means of evading the responsibility which is properly theirs.

The facts are as follows.

No SAS unit has been or is stationed in Northern Ireland.

It has been readily acknowledged in Parliament and to the press that the Army in Northern Ireland undertakes plain clothes patrols. The reason for this is quite simply that soldiers operating in uniform and with Service vehicles are easily recognisable at a distance and plain clothes are therefore adopted on certain occasions where effective surveillance is essential. As far as practicable the Army work in conjunction with the Police on these occasions, as at all other times. The value of these patrols has been amply borne out.

The training which soldiers who volunteer for service with the SAS receive would be particularly valuable in any plain-clothes operations; but in order the more readily to refute hostile propaganda about SAS involvement in Northern Ireland, the policy has been to avoid employing such soldiers on these duties in Northern Ireland until some two or three years after their SAS Service has ended. However the overriding consideration must always be the operational needs of the situation and we must be free to use whatever measures are most appropriate to counter the current terrorist threat. On this account the normal embargo may be waived when necessary. The first occasion on which this has in fact been done has been during the past three months when, in order to maintain the level of plain clothes patrols, use has been made of a number of volunteers whose experience with the SAS had been acquired only just beforehand.

These and all other soldiers employed in plain clothes duties are required to conduct their activities within the law and remain

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subject to the civil law and to military discipline at all times. Any suggestion that they are employed to carry out assassinations or to create inter-sectarian suspicion is nonsense. The fact that such claims are made is in itself an indication of the degree to which the plain clothes surveillance patrols hurt the terrorists.