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SECRETARY OF STATE  
FOR  
NORTHERN IRELAND

The Rt Hon George Younger MP  
Secretary of State for Defence  
Ministry of Defence  
Main Building  
Whitehall  
London  
SW1A 2HB

Prime Minister  
You will want to note  
Mr. King's request for an  
additional battalion for  
Northern Ireland, but await

13 February 1986

Mr. Younger's reply before  
intervening.

ms CDD  
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Dear Secretary of State,

FORCE LEVELS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

During a detailed review of the security situation here on 4 February, the GOC made it clear that he must now seek the reinforcement of his forces by an additional infantry battalion from the beginning of March. This would remain in the Province, together with the additional battalion which arrived at the beginning of January, until the end of September this year, although both deployments would be subject to periodic review. I am writing to lend my full support to that request.

I have not reached such a view lightly. The political downside of any additional reinforcement is immediately apparent. It would probably be interpreted as a sign of our nervousness about the security situation. Two additional battalions this year would be a significant reverse of the trends of recent years; and the unionists seem likely to try to use this development to fuel local anxieties about the situation, and to illustrate their view that the Anglo-Irish Agreement can only exacerbate the security situation. The timing of reinforcements, too, could bring to an end any signs of unionist disunity, and stiffen their resolve to form a common front.

I have therefore discussed the position very fully with the Chief Constable and the GOC. The latter has made exceptional efforts to support the RUC in its pursuit of its objectives, but the demands made on him are now such that he cannot sustain his present level of support beyond the end of February.

From the statistical point of view, 1984 and 1985 have successively shown the lowest level of violence since 1970. But this, taken in

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isolation, is misleading. The terrorist threat remains high; their skills have increased: and so, accordingly, has their success rate. In particular, the PIRA campaign of destructive attacks on police stations, coupled with the continuing intimidation of building contractors, has done considerable damage. Part of PIRA's aim is to drive the RUC out of certain parts of the Province, and this cannot under any circumstances be conceded. The threat of further mortar attacks on security force bases, and particularly on the RUC, is serious and of course the use of the portable single mortar, as well as such other methods as radio controlled devices and improved productions of Home Made Explosives illustrates the increasing range of options available to the terrorists.

The RUC and Army are fully deployed to keep the pressure on the terrorists, and they continue to have their successes. But at the same time, their bases have to be as secure as possible, so that the army in the course of their operations in support of the police are having to give protection to over 100 RUC stations. The Army and RUC have agreed on the degree of protection required in each case, but it is an exclusively military decision how that protection should be given. We have considered whether protection should be afforded only to the smaller number of stations known to be exposed to the highest risk; the terrorists, however, are carrying out surveillance on an unprecedented scale, and will be quick to probe at any weakness. A successful attack in a unionist heartland (and we know that RUC Headquarters itself is far from secure) would be a propaganda coup for PIRA, a blow to the security forces, and a powerful weapon for provoking a violent unionist backlash.

In addition, the RUC has recently gone through a traumatic period. The force has taken heavy casualties recently; the mortar attacks have had a profound effect: and members are understandably concerned about loyalist reactions, and about the very safety of their homes and families in the community. It says much for their leadership and spirit that they have maintained their cohesion, and as the marching season approaches, that is more necessary than ever before. The next six months or so seem likely to be the most difficult ever for the RUC. As well as facing up to the terrorist threat, they will have to cope with marches and probable considerable public disorder in an even-handed way, under extreme pressure from both sides, and amid allegations of direction from Dublin or Protestant bias against nationalism. That task will demand an efficient, disciplined, and united force, and the present terrorist campaign must not be allowed to put that at risk.

Without reinforcements, the GOC has made it clear that he will be unable to continue the military protection of police stations at the present level, and that he will have little ability to step up operations to meet an increased threat or a further upsurge of violence, or to fill the gaps which the RUC will be bound to leave in our security operations during the marching season. At the same time, the prospects are such that there is the strongest possibility that he would have in any case to ask for the Spearhead battalion in

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the coming months, possibly on more than one occasion or for an indefinite period.

I have given thought to the proposition that it is the RUC strength which should be raised, but I am clear that this is not the answer. First, we believe that our problems are essentially short-term ones which we shall master. Second, policemen cannot be provided at short notice: four hundred men would take at least a year to get through the training machine, and I am not persuaded that this would be in the long-term interests of the force. Finally, and I think most important, the military protection of threatened RUC stations is really a military task, and one which the Army really do much better than any policeman, let alone hastily trained and inexperienced ones.

I have written at length to set out my views both because I realise the difficulties this request will make for you in the context of army deployments world-wide, and because I would not accept the political difficulties and drawbacks if I were not convinced of the need. There is never a right time to commit further troops to Northern Ireland, but I believe we must grasp the nettle now if we are to maintain a coherent and practical security policy. I would only add that the PR aspects of any reinforcement would require very careful handling, and both our officials and HQNI would have to co-ordinate our lines very carefully.

I do ask that you meet this request for an additional battalion.

Copies of this letter go to the Prime Minister, Geoffrey Howe, Douglas Hurd, and Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours Sincerely  
Edward  
(Private Secretary)  
for T K  
(Approved by Mr King  
but signed in his  
absence).

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