

Wednesday 11th March 2009

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### Statement to Parliament by Secretary of State Shaun Woodward MP

Monday 9 March 2009

Mr Speaker, with permission I would like to make a statement about the horrific attack last Saturday at Massereene Army Base in Antrim.

The focus for this sickening crime was civilians and young soldiers of the 38 Engineer Regiment, part of 19 Light Brigade.

The House will know that Operation Banner – the deployment of troops in Northern Ireland – was brought to an end in July 2007. 38 Engineer Regiment is part of the Northern Ireland garrison.

These men and women are part of the new arrangements in which soldiers are based in Northern Ireland for deployment anywhere throughout the world. They are not about a garrison to replace Operation Banner.

These soldiers were in the process of being deployed for active service in Afghanistan, to support international efforts to stabilise and bring peace to that region.

At the time of the attack, most of their colleagues had already left for this deployment. A small number remained, awaiting within hours their deployment to begin.

Mr Speaker, while waiting, a small number of soldiers decided to order food from Dominos Pizza in Antrim. At about nine forty, the delivery arrived in two separate cars.

The soldiers came out of the main gate of the barracks. The cars delivering the pizzas were parked fewer than 10 yards away. As they did so, two masked gunmen opened fire.

The initial volley of shots was followed by a second. The attackers clearly were intent to kill both the soldiers and the civilians. They continued firing at the men even when injured, even when some had fallen to the ground. The firing lasted for more than thirty seconds. More than sixty shots were fired.

Mr Speaker, neither the soldiers nor the civilians had a chance against the premeditated attempt at mass murder. Two of the soldiers were killed.

The families were informed yesterday and this morning the MOD released their names. Sapper Patrick Azimkar and Sapper Mark Quinsey were held in the highest regard by everyone in their regiment. Patrick Azimkar was just 21.

He was looking forward to facing the challenges of his first operational tour in Southern Helmand. Mark Quinsey who was 23 was equally looking to the operational challenges he would face in Afghanistan.

Two more soldiers were seriously injured. The attack was just as barbaric on the civilians from the pizza company. Both were injured. One extremely seriously. There can be no doubt those responsible were intent to take the lives of all of these men.

Before commenting further Mr Speaker, I know the House will want to join with me in expressing our deepest condolences to the families of those who were murdered and to send our sympathy to the injured and all those families – who too are victims of this act of terrible violence which has rightly been described as evil.

Immediately after the attack, fellow soldiers from 38 Engineer Regiment went to the aid of their friends. They tended the wounded and cared for the dying.

Mr Speaker I had the honour of meeting with some of these young men and women immediately after the attack yesterday morning. Today my Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister flew to Northern Ireland and with him I met with this group of outstanding young soldiers.

May I put on record the admiration we all have for these young men and women. They are the greatest credit to our country and I know I speak for the whole House in saying how proud of them we are.

Mr Speaker, it is now the job of the PSNI to conduct the investigation to bring those who murdered and injured these soldiers and civilians to justice.

A major investigation is now under way. This morning both the Prime Minister and I had further briefings from the Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde, our intelligence advisers and Brigadier George Norton, Command 38 (Irish) Brigade and NI Garrison.

The House will wish to know that everything is being done which can be. It is too early for me to report on the progress of the criminal investigation. However, I should tell the House that yesterday evening the so-called Real IRA claimed responsibility for this act of extreme brutality.

Whatever self styled name these murderers choose to use, the House will correctly recognize them as barbaric criminals, who are prepared to carry out an act of pre-meditated mass murder. Callously murdering innocent people going about their daily business. They are simply brutal and cowardly killers.

Mr Speaker it is the case that the number of people who make up these criminal groups are relatively few. However they are no less dangerous for their small numbers. We know they have no community support whatsoever. But their guns are able to murder.

Mr Speaker, the police have asked for everyone in the community who has information to come forward. They should do so as a matter of urgency.

Anyone in the Antrim area or beyond on Saturday who may have seen anything suspicious, in the vicinity of Dominos Pizza or on the Randalstown Road, close to Massereene Barracks, should contact the PSNI.



The House will want to know that all political leaders and political Parties in Northern Ireland have condemned this evil act. They are all united not only in their condemnation and their expressions of condolence to the families but also in their demand that anyone who can help should come forward.

They join in these expressions with my Right Honourable Friend the Prime Minister and all the Party Leaders in this House. And it would only be right for me to record, Mr Speaker, the expressions of support and sympathy we immediately received from the Taoiseach and President McAleese.

Indeed, messages of support and condolence have been made from the United States, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. And President Obama last night made his position very clear, condemning in the strongest terms the attack and making clear his support for the people of NI who have chosen a future of peace, reconciliation and prosperity.

Mr Speaker, it may be helpful if I provide the House with further information about the current levels of security threat in Northern Ireland.

As the House will know, both the Chief Constable and I have made public our view that the level of threat posed by dissident republicans, has recently been higher than at any time in the last six years.

Since 2008, they mounted 18 attacks. 15 during 2008. 3 so far this year.

The House will be aware that last week the Security Service raised the level of threat from Irish-related terrorism from Substantial to Severe in Northern Ireland.

This was a carefully calibrated decision, based on the overall assessment of the last nine months. This period includes the attempted murder of police officers, the savage attacks on those dropping their children at school. And the failed car bomb in Castlewellaan on 27 January 2009.

Mr Speaker there was some uncertainty last week about the wisdom of raising the threat level. I believe this was the right decision and entirely justified.

Mr Speaker, policing in Northern Ireland enjoys the highest levels of confidence from the public. In my judgment it is absolutely essential that the Chief Constable has operational independence. Of course he is accountable to the Policing Board under the Patten arrangements.

He will, if he sees fit, enjoy the same rights as any other Chief Constable in the UK to request further technical backup if so needed.

That would be the case in say dealing with a threat from Al Qaeda and international terrorism. So too for any terrorist threat.

Indeed Mr Speaker we made that clear at the end of Operation Banner. In a statement to this House on 31 July 2007, my Rt Hon Friend the Minister of State for Defence, Bob Ainsworth, (Coventry North-East) said after 1 August the vast majority of military support in NI will be broadly comparable to the assistance that is currently provided in Great Britain, tailored for the particular circumstances in NI.

He also made clear that the provision of Explosive Ordnance Disposal would continue. This was the kind used to deal with the car bomb in Castlewellaan.

I hope that whatever concerns may have been expressed by Hon Members last week, and it may be appropriate, Mr Speaker, to comment on the serious distortions and misleading reports in some of the media at that time, I hope Hon Members will now feel reassured about the role of any technical support being used to tackle the current threat.

This is, as the Chief Constable has repeatedly said, not about the return of troops to the streets but it is about protecting the public at a proportionate level. And about protecting those who provide that protection, such as police officers and those who work to protect the international community or on international theatre operations.

Mr Speaker, it has been twelve years since the death of a soldier in Northern Ireland. This has been a very dark few days for Northern Ireland.

But it is a temporary darkness at the end of a tunnel of considerable light. The peace process and political progress, as part of shared power, have transformed Northern Ireland.

The perpetrators of this attack believe they can stall this progress. And in stalling the progress, instil seeds of self- destruction.

Indeed they have clearly only chosen to act in this evil way because the politics of a shared future is working. The determination and resolve of all political leaders in the face of this brutal act is working proof of a unity of purpose.

We are all united in our resolve that the criminals will not succeed.

Our confidence will be stronger. Our resolve even greater.

And whilst the House will understandably be sombre as a result of this murderous attack, the greatest memorial to Patrick Azimkar and Mark Quinsey and their families will be in our determination to unite behind the peace process and the political progress in Northern Ireland.

Let us make sure that those responsible for this attack are not given any opportunity to stall or prevent the progress of Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker, Let us join together.

Let this House send this afternoon an unequivocal message.

The men of violence will not succeed. These criminals will not succeed.

Not now. Not ever.

