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FROM: P JOHNSTON  
PS/SIR JOHN WHEELER  
14 MARCH 1996

ASST 08/1003/3  
SEC 20 MAR 1996  
CENT SEC

HEAD OF THE N.I.  
4179  
14 MAR. 1996  
CIVIL SERVICE

- cc: PS/Secretary of State - B
- PS/Sir John Wheeler (L&B) - B
- PS/PUS (L&B) - B
- PS/Sir David Fell - B
- Mr Legge - B
- Mr Thomas - B
- Mr Bell - B
- Mr Perry - B
- Mrs Collins - B
- Mr Beeton - B
- Mr Clarke - B
- Ms Meldrum - B

*1. Mr Legge  
- Mrs Matherley  
7/16/96*

*Handwritten initials*  
UNDER SEC 19 MAR 1996 CENT SEC

MR STEELE - B

**SIR JOHN WHEELER'S VISIT TO RUC AND ARMY IN 3 BRIGADE:  
MONDAY 11 MARCH 1996**

The Minister was grateful for Miss Meldrum's submission of 8 March which provided briefing for his visit to the RUC and Army 3 Brigade area on Monday. The Minister was accompanied by yourself, Miss Meldrum, a representative from HQNI and me.

Cookstown Army Barracks

2. The Minister was met by Brigadier Balfour and received a briefing on the TAOR from him and his senior officers. The Brigadier explained that before the South Quays bombing the army were getting bored and the RIR were having real difficulty in recruiting. This had even got to the stage where serious consideration had been given to withdrawal of the East Tyrone Battalion; this would have been real watershed in security de-escalation. The Brigadier said that the general feeling in the area was that the Government's reaction to the Mitchell report had not been presented very well and an opportunity to nail Sinn Fein to the wall was missed. (He stressed this was a military perception of local opinion and was not informed by the obvious political interests which the Government had to consider.)

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3. The Army had believed that the ceasefire was going to breakdown at the end of February and they had been planning for a breakdown from mid January. The reaction to the increased operations within this largely nationalist area had been to accept the need for a heightened military profile in light of the South Quays bombing. The Brigadier felt that such a profile might begin to get questioned if the "phoney war" in the Province continues. There was certainly an upsurge in complaints but, the Army were determined not to allow the positive community relation gains made during the ceasefire to be lost.

4. The real priority for the military was to keep a finger on the pulse of South Armagh and East Tyrone PIRA. The other priority was the unpredictable 'loyalists' in mid Ulster and the possible combination of Mr Kerr and Mr Wright. It was understood that Kerr had now left his mid Ulster home to join Wright in Portadown. Among the developments since the ceasefire was breached were protective seals in Bessbrook, increased helicopter availability and the location of a platoon in Newry to support the RUC. Army activity levels, which had fallen to 5% during the ceasefire, were now up to somewhere between 75% and 90%. Most army activity was being directed into framework ops, that is reassurance and protection of bases, especially patrolling potential mortar base plates. The main effort would be directed towards the suppression of the most dangerous group of terrorists within the area, South Armagh PIRA. The Army were not yet into the situation where they were mounting surge operations to disrupt terrorist activity but they had the capacity to do so.

5. On top of the framework operations, the Army would point to the necessity for surveillance and the absolutely vital nature of the towers and VCPS in catching the movement of all major players. The Army remained absolutely committed in maintaining the moral and community relations highground. There was therefore no military patrolling in nationalist built up areas, largely because the RUC had the slack to it take up. In order to support the effort not to

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These vital CR ground the Army was aware that they were taking calculated risks in not reinstating some protective measures which they had had in place before the ceasefire. If there is not to be a reinstatement of the ceasefire the military would stress the following:

- (a) they could not overstate the importance of the surveillance towers which they believed would be worth keeping to the bitter end. In this respect OP SALIENT which upgrades the capability was absolutely vital;
- (b) they would be in need of additional helicopter hours which were reduced from pre-ceasefire levels but are making these views known through HQNI and the MOD;
- (c) it is essential that the base hardening programme continues so that as many bases as possible are protected to Mark 15 level. There are arguments about the disruption in CR terms which hardening work takes but this is nothing in comparison to the disruption which would be required to harden bases during a full blown PIRA campaign;
- (d) finally there was a need to be more pro-active.

6. We then received a very good brief from a Marines Intelligence Officer. The greatest concern within their TAOR was the West Tyrone PIRA of which there were 10 groupings with the one in Cappagh giving them most cause for worry at the moment. East Tyrone PIRA had the capability to carry out any form of attack and was only second to South Armagh in terms of their success. Having said that, the security forces in the area have had a substantial attrition rate having killed 21 PIRA members and put some 40 in prison. Methods of attack vary from UCBT, Mark 15 mortars, machine gun attacks etc. The military were particularly worried about the threat from the Mark 15 in province. They believed that internal discipline within PIRA in the area, contrary to some reports, was

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ery good and that they were simply awaiting orders to move. The improved mortar capability with its increased accuracy and range may cause a difference of opinion between the Army and the RUC in the area as to where bollards might be placed to protect Cookstown barracks.

7. The military wanted to mount CCTV camera on Cookstown Court House which would give them very good coverage. The request had been put to the RUC at sub-divisional level to take forward with the Northern Ireland Court Service. Searches continued and although they did not always yield results, they put pressure on quarter masters. In short, the Army were prepared for a return to the ceasefire but they had also made preparations for a return of the terrorist campaign in Province.

8. The Commanding Officer gave an overview of the situation in East Tyrone. It was clear that some members of PIRA had a congenital commitment to violence and that East Tyrone was one of the areas where that commitment was strongest. The Commanding Officer made the analogy that the Army were standing in the goal mouth waiting for a penalty to be taken. However, they were deeply conscious of the delicacy of the situation and that any military action which appeared precipitous, even though it could be justified operationally, might play into PIRA's hands. In that respect, the military and police were liaising closely with key members of the community such as Monsigneur Faul who was a very reasonable and implacable opponent of the terrorists, providing he gets all the facts.

RUC Cookstown

9. The Minister was met at RUC Cookstown by Supt Pickering who gave an outline of the Division. K Division has a 50-50 religious breakdown and is highly polarised. There have been a number of terrorist units operating in the area throughout the ceasefire (targeting and intimidating) and one further emerging in Moneymore. Separate from the security situation, the Minister was briefed on

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Time in the area which is marginally up (largely due to the reduction of army patrolling since the police could pick up some information when accompanying the army). There was a growing drug problem in the area with an increase especially in ecstasy. There was particular sensitivity within an area which contained many Republicans at the "strip search" requirement related to combating drugs. The Supt had 3 major parades in the area but he expected all of them to go off without serious incident. The word on the ground was that although there was a lot pressure on the IRA to reinstate the ceasefire, there was no indication that they had any intention of doing that. The RUC were very mindful of the dangers of a knee jerk security situation.

Summary

10. This was a very helpful visit with the army under no illusions about the early restoration of the ceasefire; they were expecting and preparing for the worst from the Republicans and Loyalists. Nonetheless, Sir John found it reassuring that the army were absolutely determined not to allow the Community relations gains of the ceasefire to be lost. It was also reassuring that the RUC, in this area, was still concentrating so much effort on ordinary decent crime.

SIGNED

Paul A Johnston  
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OAB Ext 6498  
14 March 1996

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