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FROM: TOM CLARKE  
Security Policy and Operations Division

3 December 1996

- cc: PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - B
- PS/Sir John Wheeler (B&L) - B
- PS/Michael Ancram (B&L) - B
- PS/PUS (B&L) - B
- PS/ Sir David Fell - B
- Mr Steele - B
- Mr Thomas - B
- Mr Bell - B
- Mr Leach - B
- Mr Watkins - B
- Mr Stephens - B
- Mr Wood (B&L) - B
- Mr Perry - B
- Mr Hill - B
- Mrs Collins - B
- Mr Beeton - B
- Mr Maccabe - B
- Mr Canavan
- Mrs Todd - B

C  
NA  
5/12

1. PS/SIR JOHN WHEELER - B

[I am glad to have this update and agree the general approach, I see no harm in the proposed statement which should go out under the Secretary of State's name. Signed JW 3/122/96]

2. PS/SECRETARY OF STATE - B

OUR LADY OF MERCY ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH, BALLYMENA - CONTINUING PROTESTS

The purpose of this minute is to provide Ministers with information in relation to the continuing protests by Loyalist demonstrators at this church and at the Minister's request, offers advice as to whether the Secretary of State or Sir John Wheeler should publicly intervene in the matter.

Background

As Ministers will be aware, in early September, pickets appeared outside a number of Roman Catholic churches in Unionist parts of the North Antrim area. It was claimed these pickets were in retaliation

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for the blockading of an Orange Order church parade in Dunloy on 8 September though there was also speculation it was linked to the boycott of Protestant businesses. On the first weekend of the pickets around 400 Loyalists took part. The action was supported by Ian Paisley junior and DUP councillor for the Bushmills area, David McAlister. Church-goers were able to attend services at Bushmills and Dervock but the Mass at Harryville had to be abandoned. Parishioners were subject to verbal abuse and on isolated occurrences there was some jostling and pushing.

There was widespread condemnation of the action. The Orange Order in Co Antrim "utterly condemned" the action; the Catholic Bishop of Down and Connor, Dr Patrick Walsh claimed it was "deplorable intimidation", the local Presbyterian minister in Ballymena said "bullyboy tactics to stop people going to church are quite ridiculous" and the Presbyterian Moderator said "pickets were denying the religious liberty that those picketing were demanding". David Trimble also called for the end of the demonstration as did Archbishop Eames. The Secretary of State is also on record on Monday 16 September as having said "I read about that (the picketing of churches) with great anger. Any sort of discrimination, whether it is of that kind..... only serves to make the situation worse. It is unjust, it is wrong and it must stop."

The pickets have continued since. The demonstrations petered out in Bushmills and Dervock, though a hard-core element continue to picket the Saturday night Mass in Harryville, Ballymena. After the first week of picketing, the RUC prevented demonstrators from physically blockading the church gates at Ballymena by containing them behind police lines. This has on occasions led to scuffles between the police and protestors. A number of RUC members have been injured and several arrests made.

Unrest on 30 November

With passing time, the numbers attending the pickets decreased. Last weekend (24 November) there was widespread speculation that the Orange Order who had re-arranged their Dunloy church parade, would

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not be opposed by local residents. There were indications that if this happened the pickets would be withdrawn from Ballymena. Consequently on Saturday 23 November the numbers attending the protest at the Ballymena church reduced considerably. Optimism however that this might spell an end to the matter proved unfounded as the Orange Order were prevented from holding their parade in Dunloy by local residents (and it is claimed by others who were not residents of the village). The RUC subsequently expected trouble at Harryville on 30 November and blocked off streets leading to the church. Around 300-500 protesters turned up, some of whom hi-jacked a lorry and from behind this barricade attacked police lines with bricks, bottles and several petrol bombs. In the worst incident an Ulsterbus was hi-jacked and burned out. Several RUC officers were injured and one arrest was made, though the RUC confidently expect more to follow.

As a consequence of this rioting further condemnation followed. The Reverend Ian Paisley said there was no justification for intimidating people on their way to church. Archbishop Eames also strongly spoke out as he had done at the beginning of the protest, saying "attacks on people because of their wish to attend a place of worship, attacks on church or schools and the continuing boycott of businesses because of naked sectarianism are an utter disgrace to this community". It is reported, however, that at a meeting of Ballymena Council last night, while every speaker condemned the violence, the only motion passed was for a meeting between the Council and the Chief Constable.

RUC Action

The RUC expect the trouble at Harryville to continue. They believe there will be an attempt to repeat the violence this weekend and consequently at this stage plan to draft in a larger number of officers to deal with the situation. The actions of the protesters will be met robustly. The Chief Constable is today meeting with a DUP delegation including the Reverend Ian Paisley and no doubt the matter will figure prominently on the agenda.

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Condemnation to date

Both sides of the community have united to condemn the continued protests outside the Roman Catholic church at Harryville. There is however a definite difference in emphasis. All shades of Unionism from Loyalist paramilitaries through the Orange Order, the DUP, UUP to church leaders have clearly said that what has occurred is wrong and should stop. Many of those however also directly link the picket to the situation in Dunloy and even the local Ballymena Presbytery have contrasted the police action in Ballymena with perceived inaction at Dunloy. On the Protestant side of the house therefore, we can say with a degree of confidence that while there is an understanding of the violence they do not support it.

Nationalists look at the situation differently. They believe the link with Dunloy to be tenuous and cannot equate the prevention of an Orange Parade through a mainly Nationalist village with the blockading of a Catholic church. A more general view is that the action at Ballymena is sectarianism of the worst kind. There is also belief within that community that Protestants are not doing enough to condemn what is happening. Monday's Irish Times draws attention to the fact that no local Protestant Minister has made any gesture of solidarity with the parishioners at Harryville apart from the initial condemnation of the protests.

Advice on Ministerial Involvement

Clearly Ministers will reflect the mood of the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland if they condemn the continuing blockade of the church at Harryville. I would recommend however that condemnation of the particular Harryville incident, should be contained within a wider condemnation as the Secretary of State did in his statement of 16 September and more recently by Archbishop Eames. Such a statement could refer to the general increase in sectarian tension and incidents such as arson attacks on property closely associated with one side of the community or the other. The advantage in speaking out about Harryville from a

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political point of view is that it is right for Ministers to condemn public disorder where it occurs. It also adds the "establishment" view to the chorus of other disapproving voices and will add weight to the body of opinion which is calling for a halt to the activities. Furthermore it will serve to show the Irish, who are taking a close interest in developments, that Ministers are taking the matter seriously and are concerned about events on the ground. The Chief Constable's view is that a statement by a Minister will not cut across any operational activity. He believes however that local (ie originating from Ballymena) condemnation is likely to have a more profound effect. There are no obvious disadvantages to making a public statement about the matter, except that it is unlikely to make those engaged in such activity desist. If the protests continue, thus defying Dr Paisley and the utterances of the Loyalist paramilitaries then it is unlikely that Ministerial views will hold much sway. On balance however, I recommend that Ministers should say something and a possible statement is attached at Annex A.

Signed

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ANNEX A - DRAFT STATEMENT FOR USE BY SIR JOHN WHEELER OR SECRETARY  
C STATE

It is with deep concern that I have read about the events that occurred in Ballymena on Saturday night and in particular the attempts to prevent parishioners attending their place of worship. This was an outrageous act, which has deservedly drawn condemnation from all sections of both communities and I would add my voice to the chorus of those who have said that it must stop and that it must stop now. Absolutely nothing is achieved or will be achieved by this type of protest, it is utterly pointless.

I am [the Secretary of State is] on record as having said that all kinds of discrimination are unjust and only serve to make the situation worse. I would repeat that. I also agree with Archbishop Eames' recent remarks that those who carry out attacks on people because they attend a certain place of worship or on property because it is closely associated with a particular section of the community are an utter disgrace to the community and deserve total condemnation.

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