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Conversations with Alex Attwood, Angela Hegarty and Breandán MacCionnaith

I spoke to a number of contacts this morning to get their read-out on the current mood on the ground, especially in the aftermath of last night's killing and shootings..

Alex Attwood

Among the main points made by Attwood (SDLP) were:

- The mood among nationalists is quite depressed. People in Belfast are bracing themselves for more sectarian killings. There is a fear that when the Talks move to London and Dublin from next week, the Loyalist paramilitaries may take centre stage again to shift the focus back to the North.
- Attwood strongly disputes the UDP's assertion that there has been no structural involvement by the UDA/UFF in the recent killings. Privately UDP people admit that disaffected UDA/UFF members may have been involved on an individual basis. Many people believe that involvement is more structured, perhaps at brigade level. Even the RUC are publicly attributing blame for last night's killing to the UFF.
- RUC intelligence appears to be very weak. Last night's picking-up of people with UFF connections after the Hughes killing is regarded as a knee-jerk reaction to recent criticisms of the RUC's failure in finding the people responsible for the recent killings. Their total lack of success is also feeding long-standing nationalist suspicions about their lack of vigour in pursuing those who have murdered Catholics.
- His sense is that the IRA statement issued yesterday has fuelled people's anxiety. There is concern that the sleeping giant is beginning to waken up. The IRA appear happy to allow the Loyalists to take most of the blame for the spate of recent killings. If the death toll rises, they will be under great pressure to reassert what they see as their defensive role, probably initially using the cover of the INLA.
- The British Government's commitment to the equality agenda is of serious concern to people working in the human rights area. The weaker language used in the Propositions document feeds the sense they have that the Northern Ireland Civil Service does not accept the need for a radical overhaul in this area. They also believe that SACHR's recommendations in its upcoming employment equality review will not be adopted.

Angela Hegarty

Hegarty, who is based in Derry, is a member of SACHR and a former Chair of the CAJ, is very worried at the level of despair. Among the points she made were:

- Even in Derry where the political leadership is very strong, the Provos claim to be under a lot of pressure to respond to the latest killings.
- She described the reaction to the Propositions document as immensely negative and that people are very disappointed. I took her through our interpretation of the status of the document which she herself accepts. She says, however, that this has not got across to people on the ground, who view the document as pandering to Trimble's agenda. She suggested that Sinn Féin could try harder to get across our interpretation of the document.
- Rather depressingly, she hears more and more people questioning why nationalists would accept an Assembly headed by Trimble, particularly in Derry where they have a majority already. The argument about awaiting the changing demographics is trotted out a lot also and reflects the despair about the prospects for the current process.
- She referred to concerns that the British Government is not serious about the equality agenda and speculated also that the SACHR employment review will be dumped. If this happens she said "all bets could be off".

Breandán Mac Cionnaith

MacCionnaith is Chairman of the Garvaghy Road Residents Association and is an Independent Councillor since the last local elections. Among the points he made were;

- Nationalists in the general Portadown/Craigavon/Lurgan area are very fearful of attack by the LVF, living as they do in the heartland of previous LVF activity.
- They are very surprised that nothing has happened in their area to avenge the killing of Billy Wright.
- Many bars and clubs have stepped up security arrangements. There is local speculation that the LVF may be planning a "spectacular" in the area.
- Looking to this year's marching season, they suspect that Loyalists will use the threat of violence if they don't get their way to ensure that they are allowed march to Drumcree and elsewhere.

James Mc Intyre

James Mc Intyre
Security Section
22 January 1998.

c.c. Secretary Gallagher and Group 2.