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## NORTHERN IRELAND Information Service

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15 January 1990

### SHOOTINGS IN WEST BELFAST

The Secretary of State, Rt Hon Peter Brooke MP, responding to a Private Notice Question from Mr Kevin McNamara MP (Hull North) said:-

"At about 10.50 am on Saturday 13 January two soldiers on duty in civilian clothes were leaving West Belfast and driving along the Falls Road in the direction of the city centre. By chance they saw a car approach from the other direction and stop at the junction of the Falls Road and the Whiterock Road. They then saw two masked men, one of whom was armed with what appeared to be a sub-machine gun, run from the car into a betting shop. A third man remained in the driver's seat of the car.

"It is clearly the responsibility of members of the security forces to take immediate action to respond to any situation which appears to pose immediate danger to life. What precisely happened, next, and why, is properly the subject of the investigation now being rigorously pursued by the RUC and the House will not expect me to comment on details. However as the House knows both the driver of the car and the two men who entered the betting shop were subsequently shot and killed. A passerby was I am afraid also injured, although not seriously. The identities of the three men have been released by the RUC.

"After the shooting, the soldiers recovered the sub-machine gun which had been in the gang's possession. A crowd immediately began to gather and a number of vehicles including black taxis began to block adjoining roads. The soldiers drove immediately to an RUC station in order to report the incident. Subsequently they were

interviewed by the RUC. Meanwhile, the RUC, supported by the Army, moved immediately to the scene of the shooting and took control within a few minutes.

"The House will be aware that the sub-machine gun used by the robbers was in fact a replica. In addition, a replica pistol was recovered from the betting shop. These were not 'toy guns', but exact scale replicas, convincing in every detail - so convincing that only very careful examination shows that they cannot fire live rounds. Clearly the availability and use of such realistic replica weapons for criminal and terrorist purposes poses a serious problem for the community, particularly in Northern Ireland. It is a problem which is treated seriously by the courts. In a recent case, 2 men were sentenced to 7 years imprisonment for robbery carried out with imitation firearms; in that case, the judge expressed concern at the fact that such weapons were easily obtained in Northern Ireland. I share that concern and have been considering whether there are any further steps that can be taken to deal with this issue.

"I would like to place the incident in its proper context. As the House knows, there exists in Northern Ireland a serious terrorist problem which requires the continuous deployment of Armed Forces in support of the RUC. No-one regrets that more than I do. I particularly regret any deaths which, directly or indirectly, have been caused by terrorism. Terrorism has encouraged other types of violent crime, such as armed robbery. In combating such violent crimes, the Security Forces are required to operate within the rule of law, using such force as is reasonable in the circumstances. Specific instructions and thorough training are given to the Security Forces to help them to carry out their duties. The instructions make clear that firearms are a last resort, to be used only when life is likely to be endangered and when there is no other way of preventing the danger.

"Finally, I think it is only right to remind the House of the often dangerous circumstances of Northern Ireland - circumstances in which we expect the security forces to act in accordance with the very highest standards on every occasion. That is only right and proper. We expect them to evaluate a situation, judge the risks to their own

lives and those of others, and act appropriately within the law, often in a matter of seconds or less. We should not underestimate the difficulties they face. The RUC are conducting a full and thorough investigation. This must now take its course. I hope that nothing will be said in this House that could hinder or prejudice the completion of this important task."