

MEMORANDUM FOR THE CABINET
BY THE PRIME MINISTER

Emergency Stand-by Party for Accident
and Disaster Relief

The number of accidents which have occurred in recent months including the destruction of fireworks factories, and the collapse of a building, has emphasised the need of a properly trained relief party, standing by at all times to give such assistance as may be required, with the least possible delay.

2. The Police, as the "resident" force in each district, are the first on the scene of an accident, and commence rescue operations forthwith. However, the nature of an accident is such, that they sometimes find the task of rescue and clearance too much to cope with unaided, and they then request Civil Defence assistance. Unfortunately, a number of these accidents have a habit of occurring on Sundays and public holidays or else outside normal working hours. In either case, the Civil Defence Corps, one of whose tasks in peacetime is to give the Police whatever assistance may be requested, is not on duty. As a result valuable time is lost whilst a squad is collected, equipped and rushed to the scene of the disaster of an accident.

3. This deficiency in the provision of a full-time emergency rescue service has been the subject of criticism both in Parliament and in the Press, and in reply to a Question last May, the Government said that the possibility of the Civil Defence Corps working a shift in order to be on call round the clock, was being studied in all its aspects.

4. This study has in fact been carried out, and what it boils down to is that if the Civil Defence Corps were to remain solely responsible for providing assistance to the Police in cases of accidents or disaster, the cost of providing a round the clock service, either by increasing the present Civil Defence establishment or by curtailing a number of their present day to day functions would vary from £10,000 to £23,360 by way of an additional annually recurrent amount,

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which could increase as a result of any future movement in pay scales and overtime rates. Furthermore, some capital expenditure would also have to be incurred to provide sleeping accommodation and welfare amenities for the stand-by party.

5. The Civil Defence Commissioner contends that this is one of the allotted tasks of his Corps, and that any extended relief and rescue service should be provided by Civil Defence notwithstanding the additional money which this would entail.

6. In terms of practical economics, the Government now has at its disposal a regular regiment of disciplined able-bodied men, a number of whom are trained in Civil Defence techniques. The cost to the Exchequer of maintaining this regiment is substantial, and whilst one would not wish to disagree with the principle underlying the Commissioner's argument at paragraph 5, it is clearly a matter of economic necessity, once the objective can be achieved equally well, to give the regiment as many constructive tasks as possible in peacetime. Providing accident relief is one of them, and the additional cost to the Exchequer would be substantially less, being limited to the purchase of equipment, if co-use of Civil Defence equipment is not feasible and if the engineering equipment held by the regiment is not suitable, and its replacement when the need arises.

7. Possibly the General Workers Union might claim that the Army was moving into the province of the Civil Defence personnel, who are Union members, and depriving them of the opportunity of earning some extra overtime. The answer to this is that C.D. personnel do not and never have, earned this overtime anyway, and in any event the Union itself had advocated the use of military personnel, albeit as part of the Civil Defence Corps in preference to their retention as soldiers, for rescue operations. (Leading article in the Union's paper "L-Orizzont" of 30th July, 1970). The case of the shipwrecked tanker at Wied il-Ghajn and the fireworks factory at Ghaxaq were quoted as examples when Civil Defence were either incapable of operating or else were late on the scene.

8. Ministers are asked to consider whether they agree in principle that the Army should be given the task of providing a stand-by rescue squad, to be available for any emergencies occurring when the Civil Defence Corps is not normally on duty. If such a decision is taken, the details would be worked out administratively.

1st December, 1970.