

Army guard on food if fuel crisis flares

Mark Townsend and Martin Bright Sunday June 6, 2004 The Observer <<http://www.observer.co.uk>>

Hundreds of troops will be deployed to defend vital supermarket depots in the event of fresh fuel protests in the autumn. Supermarkets have been told by Home Office officials to expect military assistance as part of draconian government plans to protect Britain's economy from a repeat of the events of 2000 when protesters brought the country to a standstill. In addition, a series of large-scale rehearsals will be held over the coming month to test how measures to protect vital food and fuel depots would cope if protesters opt to press ahead with a series of blockades later in the year.

Although organisers have called off plans for nationwide protests this week, they have made it clear that the government will still face protests if they go back on their promise to re-examine a planned rise in fuel duty for September. One protest went ahead as planned yesterday when a convoy of 150 trucks drove through Cardiff despite the government reassurances. The vehicles headed towards the Welsh Assembly in Cardiff Bay before moving on to the civic centre. Organiser Martin Palmer said the government's announcement was 'too little too late', and said the tax increase of 1.9 pence should be scrapped rather than reviewed. Major retailers have also been assured that the intelligence services are stepping up their monitoring of potential protest ringleaders to ensure any major blockade is thwarted before any disruption is caused.

The secret plans have been agreed between the Home Office and the Food Chain Emergency Group, set up after the 2000 fuel protests and incorporating Britain's biggest supermarkets and food manufacturers. Their plans to safeguard the food and fuel chain from disruption go much further than tactics used by the police to quash previous fuel protests. News that troops will be involved in any future fuel blockades follows reports that army chiefs had strongly opposed the use of soldiers to guarantee supplies in the event of fuel protests across the country. A network of vital fuel and food depots classified as 'vulnerable' to blockade (or terrorist attack?- Jamie) have been pinpointed by industry experts from the Institute of Grocery Distribution and sent to the Home Office.

Although Chancellor Gordon Brown's decision on whether to risk a rise in fuel duty has been postponed to August, supermarkets have been told to remain on high alert. 'The Home Office has been in close contact and the security services are monitoring the situation, this is not just a police matter,' said a leading industry source. Members of the emergency group include all major supermarkets such as Tesco and Sainsbury along with global brands and manufacturers including Heinz, Kraft, Nestlé and Unilever as well as the main water companies.

Among a series of measures introduced following the protests of 2000 is an oil storage system to guarantee supermarkets can store enough fuel to keep Britain running for two days. During the protests four years ago the lack of facilities to store petrol caused serious problems. Despite such exhaustive planning, most retailers hope the Chancellor will drop the planned increase. A spokesman for the British Retail Consortium, which represents 90 per cent of the high street stores and is a key player of the emergency planning group, said: 'Gordon Brown has a responsibility to defuse the situation.' He said members were confident that a combination of intelligence and rapid deployment of troops would ensure there would be no repeat of previous protests when campaigners brought the country to a near-standstill.

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