

LIAISON SUB-COMMITTEE ON DECOMMISSIONING

OPENING STATEMENT BY HMG

Mr Chairman, on behalf of the British Government I look forward to working constructively with the other participants in the Liaison Sub-committee and with the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning.

The Government sees the resolution of the decommissioning issue in line with the recommendations of the Report of the International Body as an indispensable part of the process of negotiations and of building confidence. We are discussing "confidence building measures" elsewhere, but the potential of progress on decommissioning to build confidence between people in Northern Ireland and in the political process generally is I believe profound and indisputable.

The Government does not underestimate the difficulties ahead, but with the commitment of this Sub-committee to work constructively and in good faith with the Independent Commission, we believe a vital contribution can be made to implementing all aspects of decommissioning as set out in the Report of the International Body. We recognise that decommissioning, in the context we are discussing today, will necessarily be a voluntary process. But we are in no doubt that the decommissioning of some paramilitary arms during negotiations, as progress is

made in political talks, would be an exceptionally important step towards building confidence.

The Sub-committee has a pivotal role in considering any legislative proposals by the Government, proposals for schemes drawn up by the Independent Commission, and the type of schemes and the role of the Independent Commission in them.

It may help, at this stage, if I set out the existing framework which the Government, in conjunction with the Government of the Republic of Ireland, has put in place. I have placed copies of the legislation to which I will be referring in the Chairman's office.

The two Governments have enacted legislation - the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 in the UK - which lays down the framework within which decommissioning can happen. This legislation covers a number of issues including the specific terms and duration of an amnesty to cover decommissioning, and limitations on the forensic testing and use in evidence of decommissioned arms. Copies of the UK Act are being made available to participants today.

In two areas the legislation laid the ground for further measures.

The first of these was the creation of an Independent Commission to facilitate the decommissioning of arms. The International Agreement establishing the Commission

was signed by the two Governments on 26 August and General de Chastelain was appointed to be chairperson of the Commission on 24 September. The Government is extremely grateful to him for accepting that post, and to Brigadier General Nieminen and Ambassador Johnson for agreeing to serve as members of the Commission. We are indebted once again to the Governments of Canada, the United States and Finland for putting forward such eminent and talented figures.

The two Governments have provided the Commission with the practical resources it needs to carry out its work and the legal immunities and privileges it will require to facilitate decommissioning on an independent basis.

The framework legislation also allows for further, detailed arrangements to be made in decommissioning schemes. It is these schemes which will set out the arrangements by which arms can actually be decommissioned during negotiations. In line with the legislation, decommissioning schemes will be made by the two Governments, but the International Agreement establishing the Independent Commission requires it to consult with participants about schemes. The Commission has begun its work in earnest and has been briefed by security experts so that options for draft schemes can be available for discussion with, and consideration by, participants. The Subcommittee will clearly need to work closely with the Commission, as the Chairman has already indicated.

I also hope, in conclusion, that positive and rapid progress can be made on the work before the Sub-committee, to which all present will give their support.