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STATEMENT BY THE INDEPENDENT CHAIRMEN

At a plenary meeting today, and in other bilateral meetings over the past week, the Independent Chairmen have reviewed the present state of the multi-party negotiations.

Since the process began on 10 June last year, following elections on 30 May, a series of meetings has been held in plenary, bilateral and other formations. The participants are agreed that the talks process, which allows for inclusive negotiations on a comprehensive agenda, between parties committed to exclusively peaceful methods and which have shown that they abide by the democratic process, remains the key instrument in the search for progress. The process has underlined the belief, shared by all the participants, that a stable and peaceful future for Northern Ireland can only be secured through democratic negotiations.

All the participants have restated their belief that violence, for political ends, can and should have no place in Northern Ireland, whichever section of the community those who perpetrate it claim to represent. The participants are united in wishing to see an immediate and permanent end to all violence.

The Independent Chairmen are pleased to note that, as a result of discussions during the talks process, the participants negotiated and agreed, on 29 July 1996, detailed Rules of Procedure governing the structure and conduct of negotiations. The participants also went on to discuss and agree, in October, an agenda for the remainder of the opening plenary, setting out the subjects to be considered and the order in which they are to be addressed.

Since mid-October, the participants have been discussing item 2 on the agenda. This relates to the issue of decommissioning and, in particular, the report of the International Body. The discussions, which have taken place both in the plenary and bilateral and multilateral meetings between the various participants, have been lengthy and detailed. As a result of these discussions, the participants

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have all obtained a clearer understanding of each other's views. However, despite the efforts of all concerned, while some areas of potential agreement have been identified, no basis has yet emerged for reaching agreement on this agenda item.

In the circumstances, bearing in mind that the Easter holiday period will be followed in quick succession by a General Election in the United Kingdom and district council elections in Northern Ireland (due to take place on 21 May), the Independent Chairmen proposed that the next plenary session be held on Tuesday 3 June. This has been agreed by the plenary.

We look forward to resuming the negotiations in June with renewed vigour and commitment, and to working with the participants in completing the address to the International Body's proposals on decommissioning. This would enable the negotiations to move to consideration of the substantive political issues concerning a new beginning for relationships within Northern Ireland, with the island of Ireland, and between the two Governments.

This is obviously a difficult process. Progress has been slow. But there is no alternative to meaningful democratic dialogue. We repeat our total condemnation of the use of violence to resolve political issues and we restate our personal commitment to the pursuit of peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

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For further information contact Kelly Currie [REDACTED]