

GOVERNMENT STATEMENT ON NORTHERN IRELAND

The Government wishes to set out the facts about recent contacts with John Hume and explain its position on the possibility of a new IRA ceasefire.

Mr. Hume has suggested to the Prime Minister over the last few months that a new IRA ceasefire, which would in his view this time become permanent, is available if the Government clarifies its position on various issues, including the nature of the Belfast talks, decommissioning and possible future confidence-building measures.

The Prime Minister has consistently made clear the Government's position that we would welcome a new ceasefire but that we are sceptical about how credible it would be. The Prime Minister has also said from the start that there could be no question of changing our policy, or negotiating with Sinn Fein, to achieve a new ceasefire, which should be declared without further prevarication. However, he has added that he was prepared to re-state existing policy if that would help.

The Prime Minister accordingly gave Mr. Hume in July the terms of a possible re-statement. Mr. Hume subsequently suggested different forms of words which did not, however, properly reflect the Government's position. The Prime Minister sent Mr. Hume a further text on 23 November. This text included our views, in the light of continuing IRA attacks, notably on the Thiepval Barracks, Lisburn, on the terms and process of entry to apply after any restored IRA ceasefire.

This British Government text is attached. It describes a position which we believe to be fair, balanced and reasonable.

If Sinn Fein want to join the talks, it is for the IRA to declare a restoration of their ceasefire in terms which are convincingly unequivocal, indicate the intention that this ceasefire should be lasting, and reflect commitment to exclusively peaceful means. The fulfilment of paragraph 3 of Command Paper 3232 is directly relevant to this ("parties ... which ... establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and which have shown that they abide by the democratic process"). If this was followed by the absence of paramilitary activity, including such confidence-building factors as no targeting, surveillance and weapons preparation, the way would be open for the Secretary of State to invite Sinn Fein to participate in the negotiations on an equal basis with other parties, in accordance with the legislation setting up the talks.

The talks are likely to break for Christmas soon and to resume in January at a date yet to be agreed. The statement attached does not determine how early Sinn Fein can join the talks after a ceasefire. That depends on the words and deeds of the IRA and Sinn Fein. We need to see an unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire and to make a credible judgement that it is lasting. We need to know that Sinn Fein will sign up to the Mitchell principles. The Government is not erecting new hurdles or seeking delay. We wish to see inclusive talks involving all parties as soon as possible.

But if Sinn Fein continue to exclude themselves from the talks, the talks must of course go on without them.