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SINN FEIN'S POSITION

The British Government's Understanding

1. The British Government has received separate accounts, from the Irish Government and John Hume, of Sinn Féin's position with regard to an IRA ceasefire and entry to all party negotiations.
2. From these accounts, the Government's understanding of Sinn Féin's position is:
 - i Sinn Féin seeks certain assurances from the British Government. These are:
 - that the negotiations will be serious and comprehensive;
 - that decommissioning will only be tackled during the negotiations; and
 - that the British Government will do all in its power to promote confidence building during the talks;
 - ii if the President of Sinn Féin were told in advance that the Government would give these assurances in public, then he would give a guarantee (before such a public statement was made) that the IRA would respond to the statement by immediately declaring a genuine and unequivocal ceasefire. Such a ceasefire would be for good this time;
 - iii on entering the negotiations following the establishment of such a ceasefire, Sinn Féin would affirm their total and absolute commitment to the Mitchell principles.

3. This is what we have been told is Sinn Féin's position. It is clearly critical, because of past misunderstandings and mistrust, that there be no misunderstanding on these vital issues.

4. If the Government's understanding of Sinn Féin's position is correct, then the assurances Sinn Féin seeks of the Government are consistent with the Government's public position and so can readily be repeated.

5. Specifically:

- the negotiations which started on 10 June are to secure an overall political settlement and will address all the issues relevant to that. Any participant can raise any issue. No outcome is predetermined or excluded in advance, or limited by anything other than the need for agreement. The Government cannot answer for any other participant but, for its part, along with that of the Irish Government, it is committed to ensure that a comprehensive agenda is addressed with a view to overcoming any obstacles which may arise. The Government is determined to see these negotiations through successfully, as speedily as possible;

- the negotiations will also address the International Body's proposals on decommissioning. At that stage, the Government, along with the Irish Government, will be seeking the commitment of all participants to work constructively to implement all aspects of the International Body's report, including its proposals for some decommissioning during the negotiations, in a process which acknowledges neither victory nor defeat;

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- we are committed to raising confidence through the Talks process. The International Body's report itself proposes a process of mutual confidence building and we are committed to this as to all aspects of the report. Confidence-building is a two-way street. Against the background of the recent serious setback to confidence we hope that all parties will play their part in making it possible for future marches and parades to be handled without confrontation.

6. Given the history of misunderstandings and mistrust on both sides, it is clearly important to establish in plain terms whether the position has correctly been understood. The British Government has been told that Sinn Féin wants a meeting with British officials. If Sinn Féin believe a meeting with British officials for the purpose of exploring and explaining the position set out here is needed, the Government would be prepared to consider such a request in the light of all the circumstances including, crucially, events on the ground.

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