

○ Add No. 1).

Mr. B. Ahern: Will the Taoiseach agree that one of the benefits of the forum would be that if there was a ceasefire Sinn Féin could immediately deal again with political parties North and South? Will he agree the only alternative to violence is participation in political dialogue? How can we hope to persuade people to give up violence for good if it is clear that others reserve the right to block the path to dialogue for an indefinite period?

The Taoiseach: The answer to the first and second parts of the question is yes. There is a clear statement in paragraphs 8 and 9 of the ground rules which determine eligibility for participation in talks and as long as those paragraphs are complied with there is no bar to the participation of any party in the talks.

Mr. B. Ahern: I am sure the Taoiseach has the benefit of the discussions last evening and I note a Government spokesperson stated that there was agreement by the British Prime Minister, Sir Patrick Mayhew and others with the Government's position on where we stand in talks, but that does not seem to be the position from public comments. Maybe the private position is different. Is it the case that the British Government is still reluctant to agree to the ground rules as stated and that it has not made the position clear of what would happen in the event of the ceasefire being resumed? Would Sinn Féin be allowed take up its position in talks? It is certainly not clear in the public domain that that would be the position?

The Taoiseach: Paragraph 8 of the ground rules states that for parties to participate in the talks they must establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and have shown that they abide by the democratic process. Paragraph 9 refers to, in the case of Sinn Féin, the requirement of an IRA ceasefire. It is necessary for both of those paragraphs to be complied with for a party to take part in the talks. For the sake of clarification, the discussions I had with the British Prime Minister were on Saturday, the only meeting I had last evening was with Chairman Arafat.

Mr. B. Ahern: May I take it then that if there was an IRA ceasefire Sinn Féin would be allowed to make political progress instantly and that within a short period it would be able to take up its position in the talks? From a number of statements made since I raised this matter two weeks ago in the House, by Sir Patrick Mayhew and the British Prime Minister, it appears they are not answering the question. In the other contacts that are taking place the questions are not being answered either. The position seems to be that if there was a ceasefire the British Government would still seek a period - I do not know what that period would be - before Sinn Féin could take its place in the talks. Perhaps the British Government would not dissuade others from trying to rerun the same story that happened before whereby we would be in precisely the same position as we were in the autumn-spring of 1994-5 and Sinn Féin would not be able to take its place in all-party all-inclusive talks. From the Taoiseach's contacts with the British Prime Minister during the weekend, is he satisfied -

the Government spokesperson said last night there is agreement on this issue - the British Government will allow Sinn Féin to take part in all-party talks as soon as the IRA calls a ceasefire?

An Ceann Comhairle: This question deals with the possible future of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, but we seem to be embarking upon a wide-ranging questioning of general affairs appertaining to Northern Ireland, which is not in order.

The Taoiseach: As I said, in order for Sinn Féin to participate in the talks it must comply with paragraphs 8 and 9 of the ground rules. It must show its commitment to the democratic process and politics is real and also establish that it is committed to exclusively peaceful methods - that excludes the possibility of using other than political methods to achieve its objectives. It must demonstrate that that is the case. As I said in response to the lengthy questioning from the Deputy the last day, it is for Sinn Féin to find a way to demonstrate to others its commitment to paragraphs 8 and 9 of the ground rules. It is important to repeat that any ceasefire has to be credible. It cannot be a tactical ceasefire to achieve a short term purpose. There must be a credible, unequivocal commitment to exclusively democratic political methods - exclusively means that all other methods are excluded.

Miss Harney: Given the significant discovery of arms in Donegal at the weekend, some of them primed for use, will the Taoiseach accept that the IRA

is not interested at present in a ceasefire?

The Taoiseach: The preparation of military operations of the kind the Deputy has referred to make the fulfilment, in particular of paragraph 8, of the ground rules more difficult in so far as there is a clear inconsistency between preparing explosives and saying that you are exclusively committed to democratic and non-violent methods of activity. The two activities, preparing explosives and declaring that you intend to use only peaceful methods, are inconsistent. Every IRA action makes an added difficulty, particularly in regard to paragraph 8 of the ground rules. There is no doubt about that.

Eamon Ó Cuiv: In view of the fact that the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation placed so much emphasis on the prisoners issue and that Friday marks the first anniversary of the introduction of the transfer mechanism and also in view of the reported worsening conditions in British prisons, what representations has the Taoiseach made to the British authorities about speeding up the process of the transfer of prisoners from Britain to Ireland and what was the response?

An Ceann Comhairle: We are having general questions of a wide-ranging nature quite removed from the intentions in respect of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation and I must dissuade Members from that.

Mr. M. McDowell: On what the Taoiseach said about the preconditions for the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation resuming its activities and the requirement

What everyone should demonstrate their compliance with paragraphs 8 and 9, will the Taoiseach agree that one of the elements in showing an exclusive commitment to peaceful means is a clear indication of the end of punishment beatings? Will he agree whatever formula is used - perhaps it is best not to use exact words - the sense of any ceasefire will have to be that violence is over for good in layman's terms?

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The Taoiseach: I agree with the Deputy in respect of all three propositions. Firstly, the Mitchell principles are in the same sense as the three questions put by the Deputy. The Mitchell principles clearly indicate that one will accept the result of any negotiations and will not seek to use violent methods to overturn it. They also exclude punishment beatings. I have no difficulty therefore in agreeing with the points made by the Deputy. Naturally, I prefer to use my own words in matters of this seriousness but I can see no particular difficulty to disagree with anything the Deputy said.

Mrs. O'Rearke: The Taoiseach appreciated, as we all did, the opportunity presented by the forum to engage in discussions with various people and groups. There were many useful exchanges with the Sinn Féin delegation both on a formal and informal basis. Are the Taoiseach's officials still meeting with Sinn Féin? Does the ban on political meetings between members of the Government and members of Sinn Féin extend to appearances on television and radio programmes?

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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Will he further agree that the use of the notion of a limited lifespan for the talks should not in any circumstances be seen as a mandate thereafter to return to violence should the talks fail?

The Taoiseach: I agree with the Deputy in respect of all three propositions. Plainly, the Mitchell principles are in the same sense as the three questions put by the Deputy. The Mitchell principles clearly indicate that one will accept the result of any negotiations and will not seek to use violent methods to overturn it. They also exclude punishment beatings. I have no difficulty therefore in agreeing with the points made by the Deputy. Naturally, I prefer to use my own words in matters of this seriousness but I can see no particular difficulty to disagree with anything the Deputy said.

Mrs. O'Rourke: The Taoiseach appreciated, as we all did, the opportunity presented by the forum to engage in discussions with various people and groups. There were many useful interchanges with the Sinn Féin delegation both on a formal and informal basis. Are the Taoiseach's officials still meeting with Sinn Féin? Does the ban on political meetings between members of the Government and members of Sinn Féin extend to appearances on television and radio programmes?

An Ceann Comhairle: We are straying very much from the subject matter of this question.

Mrs. O'Rourke: Not really.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, Members are taking some licence in the matter.

Mrs. O'Rourke: The Taoiseach might wish to reply.

The Taoiseach: The forum was operating when the IRA was not killing people. It has recommenced killing people. The situation, as far as the forum is concerned, has changed. When the IRA recommenced its campaign I made it clear that political contacts with Sinn Féin would cease so far as the Government was concerned. That remains the case. However - Deputy Harney questioned me about this matter some time ago - I decided that we would not close off an official channel. I made it clear to Deputy Harney that this official channel was to be used solely for the purpose of determining whether a credible, non tactical ceasefire could be obtained, not for any general discussion. I set this out in some detail here the last day. I am repeating what I said then. I am not aware of any difficulty so far as television appearances are concerned. They do not fall into the category of meetings.

Mr. D. Ahern: In view of the circumstances which pertained during the

summer, particularly in Drumcree, will the Taoiseach agree that there is a vital need for reconciliation on this island, both North and South, between Nationalists and Unionists? There should be a re-establishment of the forum in some form to allow reconciliation take place after those events.

The Taoiseach: As the Deputy knows, it was much to my regret that the Unionist parties did not take part in the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation which was established by my predecessor. The Deputy may also know that when Leader of the Opposition I took exceptional steps to try to get the Unionists to participate. I sought to persuade them that that would be in their and our interests but they did not do so.

Mr. D. Ahern: The Taoiseach was not the only one.

The Taoiseach: The absence of the principal Unionist parties from the forum meant that the forum was not able to achieve one of its purposes, reconciliation between those and other parties.

Mr. B. Ahern: At the beginning of September it was the Taoiseach's view that a ceasefire might be achieved in the short term. What is his view now following his discussions with the British Prime Minister and other contacts that the Tánaiste has had in the past week? Is it still his view that a ceasefire is imminent or are the difficulties facing the process delaying any hope of this indefinitely?

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The Taoiseach: As the risk of being tedious or pedantic, I did not express a view, optimism, a prediction or anything of that nature. What I said in September was that I hoped - that was the strongest word I used - there would be an IRA ceasefire soon and that I had reason to hope there would be. That remains the case.