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ANNEX B

## THE MINISTER'S MEETING WITH WOMEN'S COALITION

Speaking Note

- Your election was a very positive and significant result. In an area where political representation has been male dominated, it is very welcome that women should be included in the political decision-making process and indeed play a positive role in all aspects of society.

Political Talks

- Remain very grateful for your positive and constructive approach to the talks process. Important that your voice is heard. I appreciate the depth of your frustration and anxiety at the failure to advance and address the substantive negotiations. I share your frustration and desire to make progress.
- We are determined to do all we can to bring about progress in the talks before the forthcoming election. We do not accept that nothing is possible in advance of an election. Nor is it necessarily true that progress will be easier after an election. Your support will be welcome.

Decommissioning

- we will continue to make every effort to get around the crucial obstacle of decommissioning.
- we are fully committed to the Mitchell compromise. We agree that prior decommissioning cannot be delivered. We will go on seeking to impress on others that parallel decommissioning is, in our view, not only right, but the only approach likely to deliver any decommissioning.

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we must recognise, though, Unionist concerns about whether the talks mechanisms would actually deliver decommissioning during negotiations. We must address these concerns, without retreating from the Mitchell compromise.

Sinn Fein

- Our statement of 28 November set out our position. It sets out established policy on key issues, which has been in the public domain for some time.
- It also set out our position on Sinn Fein's entry to the talks process, and the process by which the judgement would be made whether any new ceasefire was truly unequivocal.
- The key to Sinn Fein's entry lies in all indicators - words, deeds and circumstances - being consistent with an unequivocal ceasefire and a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods. Recent IRA actions will, of course, have intensified the credibility problem.
- We have not erected any new pre-conditions for Sinn Fein's entry into the talks process. The requirements for that entry are still as in paragraphs 8 and 9 of the Ground Rules, which were approved by Parliament in the Entry to Negotiations Act.
- We want Sinn Fein in the talks with no unnecessary delay. We believe that the chances of a fully satisfactory settlement would be greatest with the widest possible participation. It is Sinn Fein, however, who exclude themselves.
- If Sinn Fein choose to remain outside, we believe that ample mandate exists to justify the continuation of negotiations towards a settlement.

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Forum

- Commend your constructive role in the Forum; and encourage you to continue, (notwithstanding hostility from some members).
- Note your views on performance of the Forum. We keep the Forum's performance closely under review and will continue to do so. (Recognise that the Forum's performance has not been without its problems; it nevertheless has provided an opportunity for public debate on issues such as education, health and agriculture.)
- Its statutory lifespan expires in May, subject to renewal for up to a further year (and it will in fact be suspended before the Election). We shall obviously have to reflect about its position after that.
- [Have heard your concerns about the Chairman's performance, but it is open to the members of the Forum to appoint a new Chairman, if they can agree on this.]

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