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This Government has made clear its approach to the search for peace in Northern Ireland on many occasions. But we continue to be asked about this or that aspect, particularly about the multi-party negotiations which started on 10 June in Belfast. There has been continued speculation about a new IRA ceasefire, despite the latest huge arms and explosives find in London. This has renewed questions about what effect this would have on the negotiations, and our approach to these negotiations. It may therefore be helpful to spell out our position again.

The negotiations have one overriding aim: to reach an overall political settlement, achieved through agreement and founded on consent. They will address all the issues relevant to such a settlement. Inclusive in nature, they involve both Governments and all the relevant political parties with the necessary democratic mandate and commitment to exclusively peaceful methods.

The prospects for success in these negotiations will obviously be much greater if they take place in a peaceful environment. Under the legislation setting up the talks, if the Government considered that there was an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire of August 1994, Sinn Fein would be invited to nominate a team to participate in the negotiations. We would of course need to be sure that any restoration was genuinely unequivocal, particularly in view of events on the ground. Beyond that, the British and Irish Governments are agreed that these negotiations are without preconditions.

It is equally clear that, to be successful, the negotiations must be based on exclusively democratic and peaceful means. There must be no recourse to the threat (actual or implied) or use of violence or coercion. So, on entering



the negotiations, each participant needs to make clear their total and absolute commitment to the principles of democracy and non-violence set out in the Report of the International Body chaired by Senator George Mitchell. The parties in the talks have all done just that already.

The range of issues on which an overall agreement will depend means that the negotiations will be on the basis of a comprehensive agenda. This will be adopted by agreement. Each participant will be able to raise any significant issue of concern to them, and to receive a fair hearing for those concerns, without this being subject to the veto of any other party. Any aspect can be raised, including constitutional issues and any other matter which any party considers relevant. No negotiated outcome is either predetermined or excluded in advance or limited by anything other than the need for agreement.

Among the crucial issues is decommissioning. So the opening plenary will address the International Body's proposals on decommissioning of illegal arms. At that stage, we, along with the Irish Government, will be looking for the commitment of all participants to work constructively during the negotiations to implement all aspects of the International Body's report. This includes its compromise approach under which some decommissioning would take place during the process of negotiations. We want to make urgent progress in this area so that the process of decommissioning is not seen as a precondition to further progress, but is used to build confidence one step at a time during the negotiations. As progress is made on political issues, even modest mutual steps on decommissioning could help create the atmosphere needed for further steps in a progressive pattern of mounting trust and confidence.

It is important to emphasise that all parties are treated equally in the negotiations in accordance with the scale of their democratic mandate. No



party has an undemocratic advantage. The negotiations will operate on the basis of consensus, requiring at least the support of parties representing a majority of both the unionist and nationalist communities in Northern Ireland. But no one party can prevent them continuing by withdrawing from the negotiations.

It is essential that all participants negotiate in good faith, seriously address all areas of the agreed agenda and make every effort to reach a comprehensive agreement. For their part, the two Governments are committed to ensure that all items on the comprehensive agenda are fully addressed. They will do so themselves with a view to overcoming any obstacles which may arise. If the threat reduces again, the opportunity for further confidence-building measures returns.

For our part, we are wholly committed to upholding, so far as we can, our responsibility to facilitate agreement in the negotiations. This must be based on full respect for the rights and identities of both traditions. We want to see peace, stability and reconciliation established by agreement.

We are also determined to see these negotiations through successfully, as speedily as possible. This is in line with the hopes and aspirations of people in both the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic. These have already given momentum to a process which will always have its difficulties. We have already proposed that a plenary meeting should be held at a suitable date to take stock of progress in the negotiations as a whole. We will support any agreed timeframe for the conduct of the negotiations adopted by the participants.

Meanwhile we are committed to raising confidence, both through the talks and through a range of other measures alongside them. The International Body's report itself proposes a process of mutual confidence-building.



So we will continue to pursue social and economic policies based on the principles of equality of opportunity, equity of treatment and parity of esteem irrespective of political, cultural or religious affiliation or gender. We are committed to increasing community identification with policing in Northern Ireland.

It is worth recalling that, in response to the ceasefires of Autumn 1994 and the changed level of threat, we undertook a series of confidence-building measures. These included changed arrangements for release of prisoners in Northern Ireland under the Northern Ireland (Remission of Sentences) Act 1995, security force redeployments, a review of emergency legislation and others. If the threat reduces again, the opportunity for further confidence-building measures returns.

But confidence-building is a two-way street. Support for the use of violence is incompatible with participation in the democratic process. An end to punishment beatings and other paramilitary activities, including surveillance and targeting, would demonstrate real commitment to peaceful methods and help build trust.

The opportunity for progress has never been greater. The negotiations are widely supported internationally and benefit from independent chairmen from the USA, Canada and Finland. They also have the overwhelming support of people throughout these islands. They want them to take place in a peaceful environment, free of all paramilitary violence. That is our aim too.