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ANNEX B
FREEDOM OF INFORMATIONSECRETARY OF STATE'S MEETING WITH MR TRIMBLE: BRIEFING ON POSSIBLE
IRA CEASEFIRE

1. After all the weekend speculation, I thought we should have a word about the prospects for an IRA ceasefire. I should be grateful if you would treat what I tell you in confidence.

2. It does seem there are plans for an IRA general army convention. We don't know when, but it could be within a month or so. We don't know its purpose, but it's hard to imagine the army convention could meet for only the third time in 25 years without debating current strategy and whether to have another ceasefire, or whether to resume full scale violence.

3. We don't know the likely outcome. There are all the signs that the IRA is prepared to continue its campaign in GB, and at a high point of readiness to resume attacks in Northern Ireland. There seems to be a lot of pressure, from the grass roots, to resume violence in Northern Ireland.

4. But nor does there seem to be much expectation - even among hardline opponents - that the current strategy will be overturned at the army convention. Indeed, it seem unlikely that the leadership would let a convention be called unless it was confident of getting its way.

5. Beyond this, we have no specific reason to think that a ceasefire is imminent.

6. The situation seems very fluid: neither a ceasefire, nor a full scale resumption of violence can be ruled out. We must be ready for either.

7. One thing is clear. Until a ceasefire is declared, an attack could happen at any moment. Indeed, the IRA may even be wanting to let off a "spectacular" before it calls a ceasefire.

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8. But, against this background, we have received a number of approaches from various quarters suggesting that one element in restoring the IRA ceasefire might be reassurances from HMG, reaffirming its established policy.

*15 This
What the
approaches
have said*

9. I must emphasise that neither Ministers nor officials have had any direct contact with Sinn Féin on these matters since the one meeting between officials and Sinn Féin on 26 February. Ministerial dialogue with Sinn Féin can only be resumed after a ceasefire.

10. Nor are we in the business of negotiating a restoration of the ceasefire - our response to all these approaches is to say that the ceasefire should be restored now with out prevarication. There will be no secret assurances or secret deals to pay a price for restoring the ceasefire.

11. Very conscious of the possible traps. We don't want to be drawn into negotiations with Sinn Féin when they may well have no intention of delivering a ceasefire. But, equally, we don't want to hand Sinn Féin another propaganda gift being able to claim we have dismissed out of hand a genuine approach.

12. So we plan to put together a text which simply sets out Government policy in a straightforward fashion. It would reflect existing policy, and go no further. Since the Irish and US Governments support much of our existing policy, it would tie them in as well.

13. We are told Sinn Féin want reassurances on four things:

- the negotiations are serious and comprehensive. We would quote the rules of procedure as showing that anyone can raise any significant issue of concern and receive a fair hearing, and that all participants are negotiating in good faith etc;

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- decommissioning will not be a precondition to the negotiations: we are told, but I treat this with some scepticism, that Sinn Féin accept the Mitchell report. Anything we said would reflect our position that all participants will need to work constructively during the negotiations to implement all aspects of the International Body's report including its compromise approach under which some decommissioning would take place during the process of negotiations. Frankly, I would be surprised if the IRA could live with that - but that is our position and we will stick to it;
 - a timeframe for negotiations. We have told everyone who has suggested this that it is impossible to impose a timeframe. The participants themselves could agree an indicative timeframe - and the review we think should take place in plenary in due course might provide some indication of the pace of progress we might hope for - but clearly an imposed timeframe is not on;
 - some confidence building measures if the ceasefire were restored. Prisoners are most often mentioned, with suggestions that quite small measures (ie not early release) could have a disproportionate effect. We can only point to the measures we have already taken, and recognise that a ceasefire could create an opportunity for more. (Conscious this is very important to loyalists too). Of course, there are also plenty of confidence building measures we would like to see from the IRA - an end to punishment beatings, surveillance targeting etc.
14. We want to head off any suggestion that HMG is the barrier to restoring the ceasefire. So far, the Irish and US Governments have been rock solid in insisting on the need for a ceasefire. We don't want to give Sinn Féin the opportunity to undermine that by claiming HMG has dismissed out of hand any approach about a ceasefire.

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15. This would then put Sinn Féin to the test - either they are serious and deliver a ceasefire, or they are seen to be negotiating for some concession, which clearly we cannot give.

16. Pretty sceptical this will come to anything. Difficult to believe Sinn Féin don't know what our policy is, or that further words from us will change anything. But can't ignore the possibility that these approaches are genuine, nor that they could be used to suggest we are not really interested in a ceasefire.

17. Grateful for any thoughts - want to keep you in touch, so there are no surprises. Our priority remains the talks.

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