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No. 7134 P. 3/11

CONFIDENTIAL**PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH LOYALIST PARTIES:
LINES TO TAKE: PRISONS****EARLY RELEASE FOR PRISONERS***Background Note*

Both loyalist parties draw substantial support from paramilitary prisoners and have tended to focus on their demand for the reward of early release in exchange for their cease-fire. They have proposed that 'political' prisoners should serve one third of their sentences (rather than half as at present) and that life sentence prisoners should be considered for release after they have served 5 years (cases are normally considered first after 10 years). Flexibility in this area is restricted by the generous release arrangements in place in Northern Ireland already (50% remission and an average of under 15 years for terrorist life sentence prisoners). However, significant changes have been made to the arrangements for temporary release (about 10% of prisoners at the Maze receive compassionate temporary release each month) and the law on release was changed (by the Remission of Sentences Act) to allow those convicted of serious terrorist offences to be released after they have served half their sentences rather than at the two-thirds point as before (more than 200 prisoners have been released under this legislation which has remained in force despite the ending of the IRA cease-fire and increased loyalist violence).

Points to Make

- Government has said it will be flexible on prison issues and is aware of the need to build confidence in this area to support the political process;
- however, prisoners in Northern Ireland already serve comparatively short sentences for very serious crimes and this reduces the room for flexibility;
- action on prisoners that has already taken place during the loyalist cease-fires should not be discounted;
- further action is not ruled out, but any changes must be proportional to developments in other areas.

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CONFIDENTIAL**LOCATION OF THE LVF AT MAZE**

The PUP strenuously opposed the move of the LVF led by Billy Wright to separate accommodation at the Maze. The decision was necessitated by difficulties in safely managing the LVF within the normal regime at Maghaberry Prison (Mr Wright is under a UVF death threat) and is consistent with the policy that organised paramilitary groupings are best contained in the Maze. Any suggestion that the move contributed to the growth of the LVF as a force should be rejected; it was a direct result of events in the community.

MEASURES FOLLOWING THE ATTEMPTED IRA ESCAPE

Loyalists have claimed that they have been 'punished' for the attempted escape by IRA prisoners by the introduction of a more restrictive regime at the Maze. The management changes that have been made since the escape are designed to ensure the security of the prison and are proportionate to that aim. The arrangements have been applied fairly to all groups in the prison. Although there have been some disagreements between prisoners and management regarding headcounts and searching procedures these have been resolved through dialogue (in which the PUP and UDP have played a constructive part).

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