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STATEMENT ON PLASTIC BATON ROUNDS BY ADAM INGRAM

Mr Adam Ingram, Minister responsible for law and order in Northern Ireland, commented on the announcement today by Lord Gilbert, Minister of State for Defence, on the subject of plastic baton rounds which has implications for Northern Ireland.

He said:

"The Government regrets that this situation has arisen, and that equipment was deployed which did not fully satisfy the specifications laid down. We recognise that the fact that this occurred will increase the concerns that some have felt about the use of baton rounds in any circumstances, and may have increased the sense of distress and hurt felt by some in the community. I regret this, as I do the fact that police officers should have been placed in a position of unknowingly using equipment which did not in every respect meet the required standards. The fact that action was taken as soon as the position was brought to the attention of those responsible for maintaining law and order in Northern Ireland is evidence of the seriousness and urgency with which this matter was addressed.

"I, and my Ministerial colleagues, are determined to do all we can to bring an end to the need to use this equipment. We wish to see a situation in Northern Ireland where the police, and the Armed Forces in their support, are not required to have, on occasion, to resort to the use of plastic baton rounds to protect themselves and uphold the law in situations of very serious disorder. I know that is a view

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shared by the Chief Constable, by the General Officer Commanding, and by the overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland. However, the injuries sustained by police officers, and by the soldiers who act in their support, show the reality of public disorder in Northern Ireland.

"PBRs and the procedures for their use will continue to be kept under continuous review. Indeed, programmes of scientific research continue into alternative methods of crowd control. Furthermore, in 1996 Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary conducted a specific examination of the use by the RUC of plastic baton rounds. The report was published in January 1997, and the Chief Constable is actively pursuing all of the recommendations including those relating to training. A review of the guidelines covering the use of PBRs across the UK is also being carried out. The report set the use of baton rounds in context:

'It is the considered view of the chief officers of police that the baton gun is an effective means by which rioters armed with petrol bombs and other lethal missiles can be kept at a distance, contained or dispersed. Equally it provides a means of disabling, at a safe distance, those posing a serious threat to life which would otherwise require the intervention of officers at close quarters, and thus potentially placing them at great risk.'

Mr Ingram went on to say:

"The Government will ensure that the police, and the Armed Forces called upon to act in their support, have access to the best possible equipment to help them in their task of protecting life and property and upholding the law. For so long as circumstances require this will include the safest possible forms of public order equipment."

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Lord Gregson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on plastic baton rounds.

Lord Gilbert:

"I understand that tests have shown that a significant proportion of a batch of plastic baton rounds, approved for use in public order situations by the Armed Forces, by police forces in England and Wales and the Royal Ulster Constabulary, have muzzle velocities slightly in excess of the upper limit in the equipment specification. These rounds, which were on issue from early 1994, were withdrawn from all operational use in April this year. Replacement stocks, which do not exceed the specified velocity, have been issued.

"Plastic baton rounds and the procedures governing their use will be kept under continuous review. In addition, procedures are being put in place to ensure that stocks in operational use are tested regularly to ensure that they continue to conform to specification. A programme has been put in hand to take advantage of emerging technologies, with the aim of developing improved baton round equipment to meet operational needs but with reduced injury potential. We will continue to look at other effective means for controlling public disorder and riot situations."