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File



10 DOWNING STREET
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S 58 /97

From the Private Secretary

10 June 1997

SUBJECT
MASTER

Dear Gen.

Filed on:

NORTHERN IRELAND: NEXT STEPS

Thank you for your letter of 9 June. The Prime Minister discussed this and previous papers with Dr. Mowlam and officials this morning. The conclusions were as follows:

- (i) The broad strategy of offering Sinn Fein a date for entry to the talks, assuming a satisfactory ceasefire, was agreed. The date should be six weeks from the declaration of a ceasefire, i.e., entry to a "swearing-in plenary" by end July at the earliest (end July should be mentioned), with a rolling six-week period thereafter until September, when the substantive talks would start.
- (ii) The interface with decommissioning was difficult. We should try to reach agreement with the Irish Government (which might be difficult, given their present situation), but not table any language too soon. Otherwise the Unionists would be bound to reject it in the wake of an offer of entry to Sinn Fein. (This has the disadvantage that Sinn Fein can argue that the decommissioning terms are still unknown.)
- (iii) A short aide-memoire should be drawn up setting out the Government's position, including on Sinn Fein's four points. It should be couched in clear and crisp language. The starting point should be that Sinn Fein's participation without an unequivocal ceasefire is impossible, as is negotiating under the threat of violence. Thereafter the aide-memoire should set out our desire for inclusive, substantive talks as soon as possible; explain our position on the entry date, and the desired terminal date for the talks; and explain briefly our position on CBMs and decommissioning. It should conclude that points raised in the 10 October paper had therefore been dealt with.

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- (iv) This aide-memoire should be shown to the Irish and US Governments as soon as practicable, probably on 11 June, to enlist their support. It should be given to Sinn Fein on 13 June, together with an offer of a meeting on 16 or 17 June. Hume should be told what we were doing on 13 June, perhaps in a telephone call from the Prime Minister.
- (v) The Prime Minister would aim to set out our offer in a Statement to the House on Thursday, 19 June. The Statement would need to set this in context, including making clear in an unprovocative way that now was the time for Sinn Fein to make up their minds. Careful preparation of various parties for the Statement would be needed, including a meeting between the Prime Minister and Trimble that morning. The Prime Minister would probably also need to see Hume.
- (vi) The risk of further IRA violence in the period between now and the Statement was high, particularly if the IRA calculate that they are about to be made an offer they will find hard to refuse. We should do everything possible to head this off. In particular we should get across the message that any bombs going off now would make it almost impossible to believe in any future ceasefire. The Americans would be crucial in this. The Prime Minister will be speaking to President Clinton in the next day or so.
- (vii) Managing Unionist, particularly UUP, reaction to our initiative would be crucial. Part of the argument to Trimble should be that this was the only way to get substantive talks going without Sinn Fein, if they refused an obviously reasonable offer, as was quite possible.

The next step is to agree the text of the Aide-Memoire. I hope we will be able to see a draft this evening.

I am copying this to Jan Polley (Cabinet Office).


JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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