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SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTERS STATEMENT ON THE GREAT FAMINE

SUMMARY

1. The Prime Minister's statement widely welcomed in the Republic.
Text in MIFT.

DETAIL

2. I attended the Great Famine event in Cork on Saturday, 31 May. This was organised by Ger Egan of The Big Issue, in aid of Gorta, an Irish Famine Charity. The Prime Minister's statement made a huge impact.
3. On the famine walk outside Cork, Sky TV asked me to confirm that the Prime Minister had indeed apologised. I responded that the statement was a clear acknowledgement of failings by those responsible at the time. The walk, led by children in period costume, ended on the quay with a wreath laying ceremony by myself and colleagues from Australia, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands and Russia. Surprisingly Ambassador Kennedy-Smith was absent.
4. The evening's Celtic manifestation outside Cork was taxing for those whose appetite for Celtic dirges is limited. Nor was the handling of messages from Heads of State and Government ideal. The producers had ignored advice from Embassies that Ambassadors should read the several messages, and decided that only Mr Blair's message would feature, to be read by the actor Gabriel Byrne as the first item. It was too late to change this. In fact, Mr Byrne performed with great dignity to a hushed house, to be greeted with resounding applause. The evening ended with a dignified appearance by President Robinson and a televised message from President Clinton.

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5. The proceedings were televised, but the programme will not be transmitted until Friday. The organisers have told us that they will ensure the messages will be read out in the finally transmitted version by the respective Ambassadors. This would be the correct solution. But if the assurance proves ill-founded, no great harm has been done for us, given the excellence of Byrne's performance.

MEDIA COVERAGE

6. Sky was the only TV channel to cover the walk and their short piece on Sunday gave due prominence to the Prime Minister's statement. The Sunday papers had no coverage, but in today's Irish Times and Independent, the statement features prominently on the front page. It is widely welcomed as an implicit apology and perceived, as the Independent puts it, as an attempt to inject fresh goodwill into Anglo/Irish relations, and to encourage the peace process.

COMMENT

7. In all the circumstances events could not have turned out better. The statement, which focuses on undeniable facts, is widely perceived as the apology long sought by many Irish people. It has been greeted enthusiastically. The Taoiseach (to whom I had passed an advanced copy) stated: quote while the statement confronts the past honestly, it does so in a way that heals for the future. The Prime Minister is to be complimented for the thought and care shown in this statement. Unquote.

? further
yes!

SUTHERLAND

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