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Annex B

DRAFT ANNOUNCEMENT

The Secretary of State, Dr Marjorie Mowlam MP, announced today that she has decided to invite Sinn Fein to enter the Talks process.

Dr Mowlam said: "I have reached this decision after careful consideration of all the circumstances, following the announcement on 20 July that the IRA had ordered an unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire of August 1994.

"In reaching it I have considered carefully all of the evidence available to me about the restoration of the IRA ceasefire and about Sinn Fein's commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and their wish to abide by the democratic process.

"Among other things I have:

- reviewed the position on the ground with the Chief Constable, the GOC and my other security advisers;
- following an initial preparatory meeting by officials, met Sinn Fein face-to-face myself;
- consulted the Irish Government, as my predecessor indicated would be done during the second reading of the Bill;
- and observed over this period a consistent pattern in word and deed;
- noted the absence of IRA activity on the ground.

The Secretary of State stressed that in taking her decision she is acting in accordance with the legislation setting up the negotiations:

"Against the background of the legislation, I have now decided that Sinn Fein meets the requirements. I must accordingly invite its nominating representative to nominate a team to participate in the negotiations.

"I know that the road ahead will not be easy. There will be differing views around the table. However, I trust that there will now be a significant step forward when the Talks resume on 15 September and that all participating parties will commit themselves to negotiate a settlement based on consent.

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"I would like to reiterate the words of Tony Blair on his first visit to Northern Ireland as Prime Minister in May last. 'I am convinced that the time is right finally to put the past behind us and meet the deep thirst of the people of Northern Ireland for peace, normality and prosperity'."

Notes for Editors

Sinn Fein was one of the parties which succeeded in gaining representation in the election held in May last year under the Northern Ireland (Entry to Negotiations, etc) Act 1996, when they received 16% of the vote. By virtue of Section 2(2) of that Act the Secretary of State is obliged as soon as practicable to invite the nominating representative of each party for which delegates have been returned in accordance with Schedule 1 to nominate, from among those delegates, a team to participate in the negotiation.

However by virtue of Section 2(3) the Secretary of State is to refrain from inviting nominations from the nominating representative of a party, and shall exclude delegates already nominated from entering into the negotiations, if and for as long as she considers that the requirements set out in paragraphs 8 and 9 of Command Paper 3232 are not met in relation to the party.

Paragraph 8 of that Command Paper makes clear that the negotiations will involve all those political parties which achieve representation through the electoral process and which "as set out in the Communiqué of 28 February 1996, establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods" and which have shown that they "abide by the democratic process". Paragraph 9 recalls the agreement of the British and Irish Governments that Sinn Fein's participation in negotiations requires the unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire of August 1994.

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