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NORTHERN IRELAND Information Service

2 January 1998

STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE

Speaking at a press conference at Stormont today, the Secretary of State, the Rt Hon Dr Marjorie Mowlam MP, said:

"The deplorable events of the past few days in Northern Ireland have raised fears in both communities. Real fears which do not go away easily. We as Government will do all we can to make sure these fears are not realised. The best way to do this and to establish confidence is by making the talks process work.

"I am very conscious of the tragedy which has befallen many families at what should be a happy time of the year and I extend to them my sincere sympathy.

"These events have no place in any decent society. I condemn them utterly as do all right-thinking people everywhere. They achieve nothing and will advance no cause.

"I met the Chief Constable this morning to review the situation and he assured me that everything possible including increased patrolling in sensitive areas is being done to protect life and to prevent the sort of abhorrent crimes which we have seen. I assured him of my full support in all efforts to protect the community.

"I have said repeatedly that it is our desire to see a reduction in security activity and to return to normality as soon as possible. But in the last few months, when pressed to move more quickly in this direction, I have always pointed out that there is a balance. It is between the return to normality and protecting the whole community from the activities of splinter paramilitary groups. I have ensured that anything which has been done can be quickly reversed, as we have seen this week.

"As a result it has been possible very quickly to increase security activities to meet the threat to both communities. The security forces continue to be vigilant but in the face of such random violence the best way to make real progress is for them to have the support of the public in identifying suspicious activity. It's the best protection we can have against random acts of overt sectarian bigotry.

"These recent actions are not only irresponsible, cruel and utterly futile, they are nakedly sectarian. They are attacks on the democratic process and they should be recognised as such. Anyone who wants to find a way forward for Northern Ireland should not fall into the trap of further reprisals and should use all their influence to ensure such reprisals do not happen.

"The situation now is serious but it is not out of control. We always knew that there could be difficulties. We have had set-backs before and we have overcome them. We do so again with the support and co-operation of politicians and others committed to democracy. The mood of the people in Northern Ireland is for progress and for a move forward. And despite the difficulties we have certainly not moved so far backwards that people cannot respond, stop the drift and ensure that the talks process can continue.

"The only way forward in Northern Ireland is through dialogue and through the talks process. The people of Northern Ireland have had 6 months' freedom from major violence, during

Stormont Castle, Belfast BT4 3ST. Telephone (01232) 520700, Fax (01232) 528473-528478-528482
Old Admiralty Building, Whitehall, London SW1A 2AZ. Telephone 0171-210 6471/2/3 Fax 0171-210-6823/3785

which we have made more progress than people realise. Recent events are a stark reminder of the type of conflict we had begun to move away from. The people of Northern Ireland hope and pray for a peaceful way forward; we must not fail them.

"Now is the time for all who do not wish to see a return to the dark days in Northern Ireland's history to stand against what is happening. The best way to do this is to urge their representatives at the talks to get back there next week with an increased determination to find a settlement and not to leave the table until that is achieved.

"On Monday I am inviting party leaders or representatives who wish to talk to me about issues of concern to do so.

"Last week I had a meeting with David Trimble and his colleagues, who put to me a number of suggestions, particularly about the investigations into recent events at the Maze Prison.

"After considering these views, I have acted quickly to extend further the remit of the current independent inquiry lead by Mr Martin Narey, Director of Regimes in the Prison Service of England and Wales.

"The report of this inquiry and of the forthcoming inspection of the Maze Prison by the Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, General Sir David Ramsbottom, will be published and made available to political parties. Both the inspection team and the inquiry team will make themselves available to receive representations from political and other interested parties.

"Inevitably it will take some time to complete all of this work. In the meantime the Governor has introduced a series of measures to improve the security and safety of inmates and staff. The INLA and LVF prisoners are now housed in separate accommodation blocks, all exercise yards are being closed 2 hours earlier in the evenings, block searching has recommenced, arrangements for the searching of visitors and staff have been reviewed and new equipment and instructions have been issued.

"I am satisfied that together these measures represent a substantial and appropriate response to a most serious situation.

"The revised terms of reference for the Narey Inquiry are:

1. To enquire into the circumstances surrounding the escape of a prisoner from HMP Maze on 10 December 1997 and the murder of a prisoner on 27 December 1997.

In particular to

- examine the procedures used to control the movement of and accounting for prisoners moving outside accommodation blocks within the prison.
- examine the procedures for the control of visitors to the prison.
- examine procedures intended to prevent the introduction of illicit material, including firearms, into the prison
- examine arrangements for the safety and supervision of prisoners and staff.

2. To examine the relationship between the strategic and wider policy frameworks within which the prison operates and its operational policies.
3. To report and to make recommendations to the Secretary of State."