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Roinn an Taoisigh
Department of the Taoiseach

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FOR: JOHN HOLMES

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MESSAGE: This is the document that was faxed to your office on Friday evening - there are just a few minor amendments.

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This Government had made clear its approach to the search for peace in Northern Ireland on many occasions. But we continue to be asked about this or that aspect, particularly about the multi-party negotiations which started on 10 June in Belfast. There has been continued speculation about a new IRA ceasefire, despite the no-warning attack on Thiepval barracks, Lisburn and various arms finds, including the huge find in London. This has renewed questions about what effect this would have on the negotiations, and our approach to these negotiations. It may therefore be helpful to spell out our position again.

The purpose of the negotiations is to achieve a new beginning for relationships within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland and between the peoples of these islands. The negotiations have one overriding aim: to reach an overall political settlement, achieved through agreement and founded on consent.

They will therefore address all the issues relevant to a settlement. Inclusive in nature, they involve both the British and Irish Governments and all the relevant political parties with the necessary democratic mandate and commitment to exclusively peaceful methods.

It is important to emphasise that all parties are treated equally in the negotiations, in accordance with the scale of their democratic mandate and the need for sufficient consensus. But no one party can prevent the negotiations continuing by withdrawing from them. No party has an undemocratic advantage. Both Governments intend that the outcome of these negotiations will be submitted for democratic ratification through referendums, North and South.

The prospects for success in these negotiations will obviously be much greater if they take place in a peaceful environment. The loyalist ceasefire has made an important contribution. It made it possible for the loyalist parties to join the negotiations. They are now playing their part in shaping Northern Ireland's future, as acknowledged when I met their leaders in July.

Under the legislation setting up the talks, if there was an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire of August 1994, Sinn Féin would be invited to nominate a team to join the negotiations at this stage.

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In the light of the recent events, the British and Irish Governments attach even greater importance, if that were possible, to a formal commitment by Sinn Féin to the far-reaching principles of democracy and non-violence set out in the report of the International Body.

Both the British and Irish Governments believe therefore that following the declaration of an unequivocal IRA ceasefire, and following on a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and to abide by the democratic process, Sinn Féin should first be expected to attend a plenary meeting of the negotiations for the specific purpose of accepting the Mitchell principles. This would mean that Sinn Féin would formally affirm, in the presence of all the parties with whom they wish to participate in negotiations, their total and absolute commitment to the principles of democracy and non-violence set out in the Report of the International Body chaired by Senator George Mitchell. The parties in the talks have all done just that already.

We would then ask the Chairmen to inaugurate a round of bilateral consultations to seek to determine how the new situation, following on the entry of Sinn Féin, could be most constructively managed so that the negotiations could advance, including the issue of a calendar of agreed or indicative time-frame for the conduct of the negotiations and for taking stock of their progress.

We would expect the Chairmen to report to the two Governments within a month on the outcome of their consultations and to make recommendations regarding the future programme of work.

From their initial participation in the plenary onwards Sinn Féin would, in common with all the other parties to the talks, be subject to all the provisions and rules of procedure governing the Talks, including those governing the contingency where any participant demonstrably dishonoured the principles of democracy and non-violence.

Beyond the unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire, the British and Irish Governments are agreed that these negotiations are without preconditions.

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The range of issues on which an overall agreement will depend means that the negotiations will be on the basis of a comprehensive agenda. This will be adopted by agreement. Each participant will be able to raise any significant issue of concern to them, and to receive a fair hearing for those concerns, without this being subject to the veto of any other party. Any aspect can be raised, including constitutional issues and any other matter which any party considers relevant. No negotiated outcome is either predetermined or excluded in advance or limited by anything other than the need for agreement.

Among the crucial issues is decommissioning. So the opening plenary is addressing the International Body's proposals on decommissioning of illegal arms. In their report, the International Body said the parties should consider an approach under which some decommissioning would take place during the process of all party negotiations. We and the Irish Government support this compromise approach. Agreement needs to be reached on how to take it forward, so that the process of decommissioning is not seen as a block to progress in the negotiations, but can be used to build confidence one step at a time during them. So both Governments have already said they will be looking for the commitment of all participants to work constructively during the negotiations to implement all aspects of the International Body's report.

It is essential that all participants negotiate in good faith, seriously address all areas of the agreed agenda and make every effort to reach a comprehensive agreement. For their part, the two Governments are committed to ensuring that all items on the comprehensive agenda are fully addressed. They will do so themselves with a view to overcoming any obstacles which may arise.

For our part, we are wholly committed to upholding our responsibility to encourage, facilitate and enable agreement over a period through the negotiations.

This must be based on full respect for the rights and identities of both traditions. We want to see peace, stability and reconciliation established by agreement.

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We are also determined to see these negotiations through to success, as speedily as possible. This is in line with the hopes and aspirations of people in both the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic. These have already given momentum to a process which will always have difficulties. We will propose and encourage the adoption by the participants of an agreed indicative timeframe for the conduct of the negotiations. We have already proposed that a plenary meeting should be held in December following on the recommendations of the Chairpersons which the two Governments would request to take stock of progress in the negotiations as a whole. The two Government will also review progress at regular intervals, in particular in meetings between the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach and between the Tánaiste and the Secretary of State.

Meanwhile we are committed to raising confidence, both through the talks and through a range of other measures alongside them. The International Body's report itself proposes a process of mutual confidence-building.

So we will continue to pursue social and economic policies based on the principles of equality of opportunity, equity of treatment and parity of esteem irrespective of political, cultural or religious affiliation or gender. We support, with equal respect, the varied cultural traditions of both communities including the Irish language. We are also committed to developing policing arrangements so that the police service should enjoy the support of the entire community.

It is worth recalling that, in response to the cease-fires of Autumn 1994 and the changed level of threat, we undertook a series of confidence-building measures. These included changed arrangements for release of prisoners in Northern Ireland under the Northern Ireland (Remission of Sentences) Act 1995, security force redeployment, a review of emergency legislation and others. If the threat reduces again, the opportunity for further confidence-building measures returns.

But confidence-building is a two way street. Support for the use of violence is incompatible with participation in the democratic process. An end to punishment beatings and other

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paramilitary activities surveillance and targeting, would demonstrate real commitment to peaceful methods and help build trust.

The opportunity for progress has never been greater. The process of peace and reconciliation has received valuable economic support from the United States, the European Union and through the International Fund. The negotiations are widely supported internationally and benefit from independent chairmen from the USA, Canada and Finland. They also have the overwhelming support of the people throughout these islands. They want them to take place in a peaceful environment, free of all violence. That is our aim too.