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Adams and British open ceasefire talks

THE Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams and the British government have opened up negotiations in an effort to establish acceptable terms for the renewal of the IRA's 1994 ceasefire. *The Sunday Tribune* has learned.

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Northern Editor

only cautious optimism amongst the participants.

The SDLP leader John Hume has, for over a week, been acting as the intermediary between the British and the republicans and is understood to have carried several drafts of a statement which would be published by the British outlining the ceasefire conditions.

The republicans want immediate entry into the Stormont talks as the very basic quid pro quo for a ceasefire. It appears that Adams is also seeking language in the British statement which could meet Sinn Fein's other demands on a timeframe for the talks.

Adams is believed to be acting with the full knowledge and approval of the IRA's ruling Army Council.

The British, on the other hand, have signalled that while they would be ready to use less offensive language in any statement, there would be no change in policy. As currently articulated by the British premier, John Major, this means that the IRA would have to use "more than soft words" to convince him and his cabinet colleagues.

It is understood that the initiative, which has been underway since mid-October, was suggested by the Sinn Fein leader. The Dublin government, while aware of the talks and their progress, is playing a secondary role in what may turn out to be the most serious effort to restore the IRA's cessation since it broke down last February.

In accordance with this the British are saying that if the IRA will not use the word 'permanent' to describe the new cessation then there should be a three-month waiting period before Sinn Fein could join the Stormont talks. The British also want an end to IRA punishment attacks during this period as a sign of the IRA's bona fides.

At the heart of this effort is an attempt to draft a statement under which both the IRA and the British government could shelter yet still claim their conflicting demands have been met.

Although the aim of the three-way initiative is to get an IRA ceasefire in place before Christmas there are many problems still unresolved not least how to prevent a unionist walkout from Stormont.

According to well-informed sources the British have told Hume, and through him Adams and the IRA, that this initiative will be pursued by them to its end. At the same time the width of the gap between the two sides is still sufficiently large to allow

There are also conflicting signals on the ground. Not only is the IRA apparently

preparing targets and missions as if its war is about to be fully resumed, the Lisburn IRA bombing suggests a need to deal with grassroots' unease, a need that conflicts with the idea that the leadership could easily deliver a ceasefire.

Meanwhile, sources in both Belfast and Dublin insist that there is accurate security information suggesting that the IRA is indeed preparing to hold a General Army Convention. The mystery, however, is the agenda for the meeting, only the third since the Provisional IRA came into being in 1969.

The agenda suggested by ITN reports — that the meeting will discuss the scale of future violence and a strategy to unite the movement — seems unlikely. These are strategic and tactical matters that would normally be left to the IRA leadership.

A General Army Convention has certain limited and well described functions. One is to change the IRA's constitution, something no one suggests is on the cards. The other is to ratify "the conclusion of peace".

Most reliable estimates of the republican mood cast doubt on the ability of the IRA leadership to win such a vote in present circumstances.

The third main function performed by the convention is to elect a new IRA Executive, the 12-person body which appoints the membership of the Army Council. Whoever controls the IRA Executive controls the IRA.