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THE PRIME MINISTER

When we met last Tuesday, I said I would let you have a response to the text you gave us on 10 October.

Throughout the time we have discussed these matters, I have had two concerns. First, the IRA's murderous actions on the ground, and what we know of their future plans, are wholly incompatible with what you have been told is Mr Adams' readiness to guarantee a permanent ceasefire immediately following a Government statement which, as I have said to you throughout these exchanges, can only repeat existing policy positions. But, secondly, I am determined that the peace process should continue because that is what the people of Northern Ireland want and deserve. So Sinn Fein can still join the negotiations if there is a genuinely unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire, but each atrocity the IRA commits means the credibility gap to be bridged is that much wider.

As I have repeatedly made clear, I cannot - and will not - negotiate Government policy in exchange for a ceasefire. All along, I have said I will stick strictly to what is existing Government policy as set out on the public record. The text you gave me on 10 October departs from existing Government policy in places, so I cannot accept it as it stands. The text attached does reflect Government policy. It represents what we are prepared to say.

Mr Adams cannot be permitted to play games with words while the IRA is directly threatening the lives of men and women for whom I am responsible. If he is genuine about seeking a ceasefire, this text provides the assurances about existing Government policy which he sought. Meanwhile, as I said to you, it is for Mr Adams to show that he is serious about this initiative by setting out clearly the terms and circumstances in which an IRA ceasefire would be declared. I fear that the initial indications you have passed to us about what might be said are not very encouraging. They do not provide the assurance of permanence which I was seeking. We also discussed parallel decommissioning and the consent principle and the value of forward movement by Sinn Fein in these areas too.

But let there be no doubt I want progress and not stalemate if that is achievable. And so that there can be no misunderstanding, I want to set out clearly how we would respond if a ceasefire were declared. Following the Lisburn and other attacks, it would be naïve to take no time to ensure that actions on the ground and all the circumstances were consistent with the words of a declared ceasefire.

Incontrovertible evidence that the IRA had abandoned violence for good would secure Sinn Fein's entry into the negotiations. Short of that, we would need to take some time to assess how far a new ceasefire was genuine and lasting, as the draft text I have given you suggests. That time would not, of course, be wasted. We could for example be ready to meet Sinn Fein to explore the nature of the ceasefire, what assurances could be given and what confidence-building measures established. Before Sinn Fein could join the negotiations, they would also need to be brought up to date with progress so far.

As things stand now it is difficult to see that a firm judgement could be reached, and Sinn Fein brought sufficiently up to speed with progress, to enable Sinn Fein to join the negotiations before we expect they will adjourn around 11 December for four weeks or so over Christmas. But it is open to Sinn Fein and the IRA to convince us otherwise by their words and actions.

I look forward to hearing from you with further news about what would be said if a new ceasefire were declared. I am prepared to publish the attached text very quickly.

John Hume Esq MP