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Northern Ireland Office

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Great George Street, London, SW1P 3AJ. Telephone Enquiries 01-930 4300 ext. 276 or 277
Stormont Castle, Belfast, BT4 3ST. Telephone Enquiries Belfast 63011

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Stormont Castle, Belfast
20 January 1975

STATEMENT ISSUED BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND,
MR MERLYN REES AT 5.00 PM ON SUNDAY, 19 JANUARY 1975

On 14 January I set out before the House of Commons the British Government's policy in relation to Northern Ireland. I sought to lay before the House the elements of a policy which could bring an end to violence and set in motion a process of discussion. I made it clear that I was not interested in fortnightly bargaining over people.

The first requirement of any kind of process of this kind in Northern Ireland is that there must be a genuine and sustained cessation of violence. I will not take actions which could put people's lives at risk to buy a respite. Progress can be achieved but it requires patience and understanding of deep seated problems which are not going to be resolved overnight.

Secondly in response to a permanent cessation of violence the Army could be gradually reduced to peace-time level and withdrawn to barracks.

Thirdly once I am satisfied that violence has come to a permanent end I shall be prepared to speed up the rate of releases with a view to releasing all detainees.

I also made clear that I can give no guarantees about the rate and timing of the releasing of all detainees or the planned orderly and progressive reduction in the present Army role and commitment but real progress will be made and a totally new situation brought about in step with a steady return to normality over a period of time.

As I said in the House of Commons, Provisional Sinn Fein as well as other organisations which I de-proscribed last May, are free to take part in genuine political activity within the law and to give their views to my officials. My officials have met members of Provisional Sinn Fein, not to negotiate, not to do any deals but to explain very carefully and fully the Government position as it has been publicly stated. In return they have listened to views of Provisional Sinn Fein. There can be no legitimate objection to the continuation of such dialogue between officials and members of legitimate organisations of any kind. Meetings of this kind with members of these organisations will continue to take place from time to time. Meetings with the UDA and UVF have already taken place and will continue. I will remain in close touch with elected representatives both at Westminster and in Northern Ireland.

I note that there have been no significant acts of violence since the 16 January. I hope this is an indication of the real wishes of the Provisionals. If the ceasefire continues I would wish, and I am sure that the people of Northern Ireland would wish, to see effective arrangements made to ensure that it did not break down.

I do not think there can now be any doubt about the new situation which would be created if there were a genuine and sustained cessation of violence. I wish to say with great seriousness that the Government is entirely sincere in saying that the policy I have outlined will be implemented under these circumstances. What the people of Northern Ireland and the British Government want is a return to normality. I would hope too that the Provisional Sinn Fein will show that they wish to see a permanent cessation of violence.

THIS STATEMENT WAS TELEPHONED TO CITY OFFICES LAST NIGHT