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REMARKS BY

THE PRIME MINISTER

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE TONY BLAIR MP

ON BEHALF OF THE UK AND IRISH GOVERNMENTS

AT A PRESS CONFERENCE

WITH

THE TAOISEACH, BERTIE AHERN TD

HILLSBOROUGH CASTLE, CO DOWN

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1 APRIL 1999

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We believe we now have a basis for agreement on the very difficult issues we have been discussing.

Together, we are publishing a Declaration which we now believe can resolve these issues.

Let me say first how pleased we are that these talks have been conducted in such a positive, friendly manner which does credit to the parties, their leaders, and the peace process.

This entire process is about dialogue and democracy and leaving the past behind. If anything has shown that in action, it is the spirit of these discussions.

One year on, we can be proud to say that it is clear from these discussions that:

- all of the parties are absolutely wedded to the Good Friday Agreement;

- all of the parties accept that all of its measures must be implemented;

- all of the parties insist that violence must be given up for good;

- all of the parties recognise that this obligation must be fulfilled according to the timescale set out in the Good Friday Agreement;

- and all of the parties recognise the democratic mandate of others

These are very important principles and very important advances. And do not forget that a good deal has already been done to make the Good Friday Agreement a reality.

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But we had still not resolved how to establish the executive on a satisfactory basis for all the parties. We believe we can now do so.

The Declaration we are publishing sets out a process by which we will, within the next few weeks, establish all the institutions: the executive; the North/South Ministerial Council, the North/South Implementation Bodies, the British/Irish Council and the British/Irish Inter-Governmental Conference.

The Declaration states too that while there is no pre-condition to decommission, there is an obligation to decommission.

The Declaration sets out how:

- nominations will be made under the d'Hondt procedure of those to take up office as Ministers when powers are devolved;

- at a date not later than one month from the d'Hondt procedure is run, a collective act of reconciliation will take place which will see arms put beyond use, on a voluntary basis, in a manner verified by the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. General de Chastelain is making a statement in support of this today.

- within the same timescale, the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning will make a report on progress. It would be understood by all that the successful implementation of the Agreement will only be achieved if the steps above are taken within the proposed timescales; if not, the nominations would have to be confirmed by the Assembly.

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- around the time of the act of reconciliation, powers will be devolved and the British-Irish Agreement will enter into force to set up the institutions.

- in addition, we envisage further moves on normalisation and demilitarisation in recognition of the changed security situation.

Both Governments have put real effort into this set of proposals, and are convinced that we will get full agreement upon them. There will now be a pause for reflection, with a final round of meetings reconvening on Tuesday, 13 April, to finalise the agreement.

And given the manner in which the parties are facing up to their responsibilities, and their duties as democrats, we have no doubt whatever that we will get there.

We cannot emphasise enough how positive the mood has been, and how constructive the approach of the parties.

That, allied to the force of the vast majority of people willing us on, is what will ensure that we do get there.

There is no turning back on the road to peace. Today's Declaration, following the Good Friday Agreement of a year ago, is another huge and significant milestone on the way to our destination. A Northern Ireland free from conflict, from prejudice, from the battles of the past. Offering the children here the future they deserve, which is now coming within their grasp.

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