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NORTHERN IRELAND
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26 August 1999

STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE

In the light of recent events, including the savage and disgraceful murder of Charles Bennett and the arrests in the United States and Ireland of people suspected of smuggling arms, I have reviewed the state of the IRA cease-fire with my security advisers. I have also received information from the United States and Irish Governments on these cases.

Given the forthcoming court proceedings in both cases, it would be wrong for me to comment in detail about allocation of responsibility for these crimes.

There have been occasions in the past when I have been very concerned about the status of the IRA's ceasefire, and indeed that of other paramilitary organisations. The available information in the past has not been of sufficient strength to give me a full picture. But in this case the information is already clear and indeed the Chief Constable has said that there is no doubt that the IRA were involved in the Bennett murder. Information is also clear in relation to the arms importation. Both are utterly deplorable and incompatible with the society that all are striving to develop under the Good Friday Agreement.

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I have left Sinn Fein in no doubt that all violence, for whatever reason it is perpetrated, is unacceptable, and have called on them to use their influence to ensure that there is no repetition.

At the same time, it should be remembered that the Sentences Act requires me to reach an overall judgement about the status of any organisation's cease-fire. I can and must take account of all the factors specified in the Act in arriving at such a judgement. That is what I have done, in accordance with the legislation, not in accordance with anyone else's definition.

On that basis, although the situation in relation to the IRA is deeply worrying, I do not believe that there is a sufficient basis to conclude that the IRA ceasefire has broken down. Nor do I believe that it is disintegrating, or that these recent events represent a decision by the organisation to return to violence. I have therefore decided not to use my powers under the Sentences Act at this time. But I want to make entirely clear that I have come very close to judging that the IRA's ceasefire is no longer for real. I will therefore be keeping their position under close review, as required by the Act, and will not hesitate to act decisively where I consider that their, or any other, ceasefire has broken down.

The peace we have now is imperfect, but better than none. If violence continues, the political process - which depends on confidence and trust - will be increasingly at risk.

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Statement by Ms Liz O'Donnell, TD, Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs, on Status of IRA Ceasefire

Responding to today's statement by the Secretary of State, Dr Mo Mowlam, the Government stated that they fully share and support her assessment that, in terms of an overall judgement, the IRA ceasefire has not broken down. The Government have been in close and ongoing contact with the Secretary of State on the issue.

In view of the implications for possible future court proceedings, the Government do not wish to comment in detail on specific incidents. We wish to make clear, however, that we deplore and condemn each and every act of violence. All such acts are utterly unacceptable and that view has been conveyed in the strongest terms to all with influence on paramilitary organisations.

In close consultation with the British Government, we will continue to monitor the ceasefires of the paramilitary organisations. It continues to be our belief that the most effective means of ensuring that all acts of violence are put behind us for good is through the consolidation of the political process and, in particular, through the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. It is essential that we move forward now with resolving the outstanding difficulties in this regard and we will be working closely to this end with the British Government, the parties and Senator George Mitchell in the Review process over the coming weeks.

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Speaking points - Secretary of State's determination on ceasefires, 26 August 1999

- The Government shares the overall judgement of the Secretary of State that the IRA ceasefire has not broken down. The two Governments worked in the closest consultation on the issue, but because of specific requirements under British legislation, the Secretary of State had a particular determination to make in that context.

- This was a difficult decision to be made, and the Government appreciates the rigour and the determination with which, as always, Dr. Mowlam carried out her duties.

- The decision will, of course, be kept under review by the Secretary of State and consultations between the Governments are ongoing. The decision may be reconsidered at any stage that such consideration is deemed necessary.

- It is important to be aware that there are issues of forthcoming court proceedings and it is not possible to make specific comments with regard to individual incidents. But in making an overall assessment on these matters, the Governments have to take a wide range of factors into account. This Mo Mowlam has done and she has come to the overall judgement, supported by my Government, that the IRA ceasefire has not broken down.

- Let me however also emphasise strongly that every act of violence and murder is abhorrent, wrong and to be unreservedly condemned. Those responsible must be - and will be - pursued and made subject to the full rigours of the law. That is a fundamental principle for both Governments.

- The critical challenge which lies ahead of us all now is to ensure that every kind

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of violence is out behind us for good. Ultimately, the best means by which this can be done is through the consolidation of the political process and specifically, through the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement in all its aspects.

- We must all now focus all our energy on the forthcoming review of the implementation of the Agreement, being facilitated by Senator George Mitchell, and the Governments will be working intensively with the Senator and the parties to this end in the coming weeks.

If asked about Patten

- Don't want to speculate on the content of the Patten Commission's report - will approach it positively.

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