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Sinn Féin

SINN FÉIN

SUBMISSION

ON

DEMILITARISATION

SUBMITTED

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SUBMISSION ON DEMILITARISATION

The British governments recently released **'Security - Return to Normality'** paper presents major areas of concern for Sinn Féin. (Of primary concern is the absence of any indication that the British Government will impose its authority on it's own 'securocratic' establishment.) The recent paper released by Peter Mandelson failed to address in a meaningful manner the issue of 'Normalisation' and the absence of a definitive timetable removes any justification for describing the paper as fulfilling the Government's commitment. The British Government remains in default of the obligations contained in the Good Friday Agreement.

The participants to the GFA recognised that the development of a peaceful environment on the basis of the Agreement should mean a normalisation of security arrangements and practices.

In the Agreement the BGvt commit themselves to the objective of as early a return as possible to normal security arrangements and to a published overall strategy dealing with:

(i) *the reduction of the numbers and role of the Armed Forces deployed in the north of Ireland to levels compatible with a normal peaceful society;*

(ii) *the removal of security installations;*

(iii) *the removal of emergency powers*

(iv) *other measures appropriate to and compatible with a normal peaceful society.*

It would be helpful to recall what the Good Friday Agreement has to say on this subject in a section titled **"SECURITY"**.

1. "The participants note that the development of a peaceful environment on the basis of this agreement can and should mean a normalisation of security arrangements and practices.

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2. The British Government will make progress towards the objective of as early a return as possible to normal security arrangements in Northern Ireland, consistent with the level of threat and with a published overall strategy, dealing with:

   (i) the reduction of the numbers and role of the Armed Forces deployed in Northern Ireland to levels compatible with a normal peaceful society;

   (ii) the removal of security installations;

   (iii) the removal of emergency powers in Northern Ireland; and

   (iv) other measures appropriate to and compatible with a normal peaceful society.

3. The Secretary of State will consult regularly on progress, and the response to any continuing paramilitary activity, with the Irish Government and the political parties, as appropriate.

4. The British Government will continue its consultation on firearms regulation and control on the basis of the document published on 2 April 1998.

5. The Irish Government will initiate a wide-ranging review of the Offences Against the State Acts *1939-85* with a view to both reform and dispensing with those elements no longer required as circumstances permit."

The Good Friday Agreement could hardly be more explicit in its description of the obligations of the British Government (and Paragraphs 1 – 4 express the detail of these requirements.) (Yet the British government continues) Their attempts to justify a failure to establish a precise timetable or sequence of measures to achieve what is termed 'normalisation' by expressing an exaggerated fear of the threat posed by groups who could use or would threaten to use violence is totally unacceptable.

Who has quantified or gauged this threat? Which nameless 'security expert', vested interest group or branch of the British military or security establishment decided on behalf of our entire community that we will continue to endure a continuing military and security agenda?

Given the securocratic agenda, which has powerful support within elements of the British establishment, Sinn Féin is fully entitled to be sceptical and suspicious of such opinions. What is there to prevent such scare tactics being used to indefinitely block progress on a substantive process of normalisation?

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What the Good Friday Agreement requires from the British government is a precise timetable - encompassing all elements of its demilitarisation programme. What is also required, as Sinn Féin made clear in a submission to Mo Mowlam (9th June 1999) is the establishment of a normalisation monitoring mechanism (British / Irish /International).

Sinn Féin take this opportunity to remind the Secretary of State of the commitment to consult with the political parties on this issue.

HOW SIGNIFICANT HAS THE MILITARY SCALEDOWN BEEN?

The British government would claim that 26 bases and installations have been closed since 1995. Are all who support the Peace Process not fully entitled to know how many bases and installations are still functioning, in which areas and for what purpose? Such people are sure to wonder why the Secretary of State has chosen to be silent on this crucial matter?

If society is to be convinced that these closures were not dictated solely by economic or propaganda purposes then an immediate programme for the evacuation, closure and demolition of remaining bases, barracks, fortifications and surveillance equipment must be forthcoming. This is especially important in those communities where the presence of British military installations are opposed and resented. Why for example is there such a bloody-minded refusal to remove the observation posts on top of Divis, New Lodge or Broadway flats complexes or of the obtrusive and oppressive installations in South Armagh?

The substantial and ongoing construction and refurbishment of military installations throughout the North should cease forthwith. The British government's professed commitment to the removal of these installations is belied by the augmentation of its military capacity in areas such as South Armagh; already the most heavily militarised in Western Europe.

The British government paper states that military patrolling has been reduced by two

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thirds but again we are not told the factual statistics of military patrolling currently taking place. Neither are we told in which areas they do take place - with or without the accompaniment of the RUC - and what is the justification for this continued military activity. Sinn Féin would contend that such information would reveal the extent to which Nationalist areas are concentrated upon.

In the context and the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement the British army should withdraw its personnel to barracks without further delay, pending return to barracks in Britain.

The British government should provide accurate and verifiable figures on the total numbers of British security personnel at present in the north. Peter Mandleson in outlining the government's approach stated that there is fewer than 15,000 service personnel on operational duties in the north. Now what exactly does he mean? What is meant by 'operational duties'? How many security personnel are deployed in 'unspecified' activities? Sinn Féin would require clarification on what the British Government describes as 'service personnel engaged in normal peacetime activity' and on the description 'operational duties', especially given the continued activities of specialist units of the British Army.

The removal of barriers and checkpoints in different parts of the north has been alluded to in the document and whilst this welcome process should be accelerated, it has in the past been used by the British government to create the illusion of movement in terms of demilitarisation. What is required and which is still awaited is a programmed approach to the removal of all manifestations of British militarisation.

In the current political circumstances the full-time RIR should be stood down or withdrawn from the six-counties, the part-time RIR should be disbanded forthwith. If, as Peter Mandleson states, the Good Friday Agreement represents a fresh start, then clearly this sectarian force which has, as with its predecessor, the UDR, been responsible for a legacy of collusion and murder, has no part to play in the creation of a new society.

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The RUC

The RUC are clearly a discredited and sectarian paramilitary police force and should be disbanded forthwith. The sinister role of the RUC throughout its history will ensure that scandals and controversies such as the murders of Pat Finnucane, Robert Hamill and Rosemary Nelson will continue to dominate the policing debate.

Yet four months after the publication of the Patton Report we still await the British Government legislation on policing which should be produced without further delay.

'EMERGENCY POWERS'

In previous submissions Sinn Féin has called for a return to normal standards in law and the establishment of a judicial system reflecting diversity of allegiance.
Other important measures would include;

(i) Revoking emergency legislation.

(ii) Re-establishing the right to silence.

(iii) Revoking or abandoning the use of 'Public Interest Immunity Certificates'.

(iv) Review of the powers of inquests (to ensure that they be prompt, have the power to issue verdicts and compel witnesses and document production, and provide access to relevant information and free legal aid).

The British government highlights the reduction in arrests, detentions, searches and non-jury trials between 1994 and 1998. It fails to comment, however, on the significant reality that 'emergency legislation' is still in use and the document states quite clearly that the British Government has no immediate plans to dispense with such draconian laws. On the contrary the NIO intends to include it on a 'temporary' basis within the new British legislation currently being framed.

The commitment to review this specific part of any new legislation will be of little comfort when one recalls the so-called temporary nature of the EPA and PTA when introduced in the seventies.

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Sinn Féin views with great concern the overall implications of the proposed legislation which will not only perpetuate the present potential for human and civil rights abuses but will further dilute civil liberties and the right to participate in legitimate forms of protest.

All emergency legislation must be repealed as required in the Good Friday Agreement. In the interim a monitoring body should be tasked with investigating human and civil rights abuses at the hands of the RUC, British Army and Special Branch.

Outstanding warrants for arrest and extradition

All outstanding warrants for arrests and extradition must be rescinded.

Warrants in the ongoing extradition of Angelo Fusco should be withdrawn immediately and proceedings stopped. These actions are contrary to the spirit of the section of the Good Friday Agreement dealing with the release of prisoners. They serve only to undermine confidence in the British government's commitment to fulfil its obligations under the Agreement.

PLASTIC BULLETS and INTERROGATION CENTRES

Yet again the British government has pledged to review the use of plastic bullets. This casual approach is totally unacceptable and an insult to the families of those killed or maimed by these lethal projectiles.

Numerous reports by internationally renowned bodies and individuals have consistently called for the banning of plastic bullets and there can be no justification for the continued British government procrastination on this issue.

The consequences of plastic bullets are evident for anyone to see. There is no need to engage in any review. Plastic bullets must be withdrawn from use immediately.

The British government has trumpeted the closure of Castlereagh interrogation centre and has indicated that similar centres at Gough Barracks and Strand Road are to close as soon

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as practicable. We are obliged to ask, why the delay? What different or more subversive conditions are present in Armagh or Derry to justify this position?
It is difficult to imagine that there would be different criteria applied to the functioning of Gough Barracks and Strand Road as interrogation centres and therefore common sense would demand that there should be no further delay in announcing the immediate closure dates for these installations.

LICENSED WEAPONS

The British government paper makes no reference whatsoever to the issue of personal weapons.

There are close to 150,000 licensed weapons in circulation in the north. This is obviously a source of some concern because these weapons are held mostly by members of the Unionist community and there needs to be a re-examination of the criteria under which licenses are issued.

In a stable society the need for a personal arsenal becomes increasingly redundant and a review of ownership, numbers and calibre of weaponry should be undertaken.

Stringent and retrospective legislation with a specified timetable for implementation should be introduced governing the issue of all licenses and with a view to the substantial reduction of private weapons in the north.

VICTIMS

The report states that the needs of victims of violence are being urgently addressed. This process should be encouraged but it is imperative that no distinction is made between victims. Genuine healing and reconciliation can only be properly achieved when there is official recognition that no one person or section of our society has had or experienced a monopoly of suffering or grief.

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We have all been victims of this conflict and, as such, there is a requirement that everyone is afforded parity of recognition and respect.

CONCLUSION

Sinn Féin believes that this British government report lacks the detail and substance to which it committed itself under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement. Mr Adam Ingram promised on behalf of the British Government more than 14 months ago to produce such a timetabled strategy.

Nationalists and Republicans are not interested in minimalist or ineffectual gestures. We want to see an end to plastic bullets - not a review. We want to see the disbandment of the RUC, the end of military operations by the British Army and the RIR. We want to hear the announcement of the closure of hilltop forts and spy posts, the dismantling of the apparatus of militarisation that pervades our areas.

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