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Stormont Castle, Belfast
11 February 1975

STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND, MR MERLYN REES MP,
IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS AT WESTMINSTER ON TUESDAY 11 FEBRUARY 1975

With permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to make a statement.

On 14 January, I outlined to the House the Government's policy towards Northern Ireland. I said that the Government was seeking a lasting peace and that a genuine and sustained cessation of violence would create a new situation. If that took place, there would be a progressive reduction in the present commitment of the Army, both in numbers and in the scale of activity, leading to a reduction to peace-time levels and withdrawal to barracks. I also said that, once I was satisfied that violence had come to a permanent end, I should be prepared to speed up the rate of releases with a view to releasing all detainees. I made it clear that Ministers and officials were ready to explain this policy and hear the views of those in Northern Ireland who had something to contribute.

I re-emphasised this policy in my statement on 5 February and told the House that my officials had had a number of meetings with various organisations including Provisional Sinn Féin. At those meetings officials had been under instructions to expound the Government's policy and to outline and discuss the arrangements that might be made to ensure that any ceasefire did not break down.

There have been further meetings with Provisional Sinn Féin and the Provisionals have declared a further ceasefire to run from 6 pm on Monday 10 February 1975.

The House will wish to have more details of the discussions. On 16 January, the Provisional IRA did not prolong their temporary suspension of offensive military action and made a good deal of alleged incidents which, whatever the true facts, they claimed should not have happened.

Subsequently, my officials put to Provisional Sinn Féin a scheme designed to make effective arrangements for ensuring that any future ceasefire did not break

down. This has five main elements. First, a number of incident centres, manned by civil servants on a 24-hour basis, will be established in various parts of Northern Ireland. These centres will be linked with my office in Belfast. Second, if developments occur which seem to threaten the ceasefire, these incident centres will act as a point of contact in either direction. Third, issues can be referred to my office in Belfast and clarified there. Fourth, cases referred up to the Northern Ireland Office will be considered, and a reply passed back to the incident centre for onward transmission. Fifth, if out of these exchanges general difficulties about the ceasefire arrangements emerge, then discussions will be arranged between my officials and representatives of legal organisations to clarify them. There will be full consultation by officials with the security forces on these arrangements which will cover only incidents arising directly out of the ceasefire.

This is what the discussions have been about, and these arrangements will be brought into effect during the next few days.

These practical arrangements can only be the first steps towards a permanent peace. There are many problems yet to overcome in a situation which is far from clear. There is no quick and easy solution and winding down from violence will not happen overnight. It is relatively easy to identify these problems.

In some cases a continued cessation of violence will, as I have indicated before, bring its own results. The presence of the Army will become progressively less obtrusive. Screening, photographing and identity checks can be brought to an end. It will be easier to move about. I shall not sign Interim Custody Orders.

The position of the Security Forces remains as I have previously stated it, namely that actions are related to the level of any activity which occurs. If this diminishes, then so too will the actions of the Security Forces. But I must make it clear that anyone involved in acts of violence will be prosecuted in the courts.

I have made clear the basis of Government policy, namely that we are seeking a genuine and sustained cessation of violence. This is not just a question of time but, if people go on below the surface acquiring explosives and arms and preparing for violence at some later date, then no-one will expect me to regard the cessation of violence as genuine. It means an end to bombings, murders and kneecappings, to kangaroo courts, to armed robberies and hi-jackings; to the horrors of which even the last few days have given us fresh examples.

Sectarian murders and protection rackets must be ended, and the House will be aware that this affects the whole community.

The community itself must contribute positively to peace. This is not just a matter for the Police; it is something in which the whole community must be involved. Policing and community peace-keeping is in everyone's interest.

There are other very difficult problems which I should put to the House because they will have to be tackled. How is permanent peace to be secured? How is respect for the law to be restored? What is to happen to the Emergency Provisions Act and to proscribed organisations? How is the threat of murder and assassination to be brought to an end and people protected? How are the communities to live in peace together? How are jobs to be found so that people can live with their families at home and enjoy a life without fear? These are not questions to which I have ready answers, but they all require examination, thought and action. The Government will do all it can to help solve them, but it would be an illusion even to think they will disappear overnight. Patience, understanding and goodwill are needed, and a heavy responsibility here rests on the politicians, and would-be politicians, in Northern Ireland to seek out constructive solutions to deal with real problems that have persisted for more than 50 years. I hope now that a process of discussion and debate can replace violence.

My task now is to seek a permanent end to violence, which is the first requirement of any process of discussion in Northern Ireland. This was why I felt it right to take some first steps of a practical kind once I received indications that the Provisionals contemplated reinstating their ceasefire and that they accepted that practical arrangements were needed to ensure that it did not break down. That is what the talks have been about. There has been no question of bartering away the future of the people of Northern Ireland.

As I have said, the situation is far from clear-cut. There is no ready-made or well-defined path ahead. I want to find a way forward, but there are many obstacles and many difficulties. It would be idle to pretend they do not exist. The fact that there is a ceasefire and practical arrangements for monitoring it are the first tentative and welcome steps which I have reported to the House today. With your permission Mr Speaker I shall continue to report any further developments to the House.