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Northern Ireland Office

Press Notice

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THE FOLLOWING IS THE TEXT OF A STATEMENT TO PARLIAMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE, MR MERLYN REES MP, TODAY, WEDNESDAY 12 MARCH 1975

Since the ceasefire resumed on 10 February, there have been no major incidents between the Security Forces and the Provisional IRA. The Government Incident Centres set up to communicate about possible misunderstandings which might threaten the ceasefire have been of practical value.

A beginning has been made in changing the role of the Army. For example, there has been a considerable reduction in the size and frequency of Army patrols and in the scale of searching and questioning. Some road blocks and some road humps have been removed.

The House will know that, despite the Provisional ceasefire, violence has not ceased. There have been feuds between various groups such as the Irish Republican Socialist Party and the Official IRA. There have been inter and intra sectarian killings and wounding. The number of deaths since 10 February has been 14, and 124 people have been injured. None have been members of the Security Forces. In the same period, 16 people have been charged with murder and attempted murder, and another 53 charged with other serious security-type offences.

With regard to detention, the House should know that I have signed no Interim Custody Orders since the ceasefire resumed. On 24 February, I announced a programme for the release of a further 80 detainees over the coming weeks. Forty have so far been released. Depending on the security situation, I hope to complete this programme by Easter. At the moment, a total of 122 detainees have been released since the original ceasefire on 22 December 1974. If all goes well, the total should reach about 160 by Easter. After that I intend that a further release programme should follow, but again related to a genuine and sustained cessation of violence. I am convinced that now is the time to look at some of the wider implications of the problems that 6 years of violence have created in Northern Ireland. These problems are a tangled skein; I want to make a start on unravelling them. The ceasefire has highlighted the need for action.

I am especially concerned about young adult offenders, and I believe this view is widely shared throughout the community in Northern Ireland. I have asked Lord Donaldson, one of my Parliamentary Under Secretaries of State, to take charge of a special enquiry into the problem of young offenders and to report to me as a matter of urgency. He will look at the question of accommodation, including the extent to which it may be possible to use the new and improved prison accommodation which will start to become available later this year for young people. He will also look at educational facilities and vocational training and examine the question of whether a special parole or licensing scheme should be introduced for young offenders.

In the same spirit, I hope soon to bring before the House a parole scheme for convicted prisoners along the lines of that which already operates in Great Britain. With regard to the particular question of special category prisoners, the House will wish to discuss this matter further in the context of considering the Gardiner Report.

Policing is vital to the future of Northern Ireland. There can only be one Police Service. The Government wants to achieve a situation where the RUC, accepted and sustained by the law-abiding community, becomes the major organisation for law and order. This is not a role for the Army.

This is not going to be achieved overnight. It does not involve trying to flood the difficult areas with policemen. The plain fact is that the Army will have to carry out some ordinary policing functions in some places for some time to come.

With regard to the control of the Police, there is a delicate balance of functions to be achieved between central government - the Home Secretary and Secretary of State for Scotland in Great Britain and myself in Northern Ireland - and local government in the shape of a Police Authority and the Chief Constable, who is operationally autonomous. The achievement and maintenance of this relationship is of fundamental importance to the liberty of the citizen.

On this basis it may be that the Constitutional Convention will have ideas to contribute to this very difficult question of policing. But it must be clear, as with the work of the Convention as a whole, that a final decision on this will be for this House to make.

There is, too, the question of complaints against the Police. Let me say that I believe the existing complaints procedure is being carried out well, but I intend in due course, as is intended in Great Britain, to add in Northern Ireland an independent element into the procedure.

As I said in the House on 14 January, the Government seek a lasting peace, and I also said that a permanent cessation of violence would enable the Army to make a planned, orderly and progressive reduction in its present commitments. This is still my aim. If the security situation permits, further reductions will be made in Army force levels.

I also want to see further relaxations in security so that people can move about more easily. Again, if the situation permits, I would like to bring to an end the searching of pedestrians entering the city centres in Londonderry and Belfast and, before taking such a decision, I would of course take into account the views of the people and the traders there.