

LIAISON SUB-COMMITTEE ON CONFIDENCE BUILDING MEASURES

SDLP SUBMISSION ON PRISONERS

1 The SDLP has always contended that prisoners and their families should be accorded consideration and sensitive treatment on the basis of their own rights and needs even when there was no peace process. That case should be all the more compelling in the context of the peace process and the need for confidence building.

2 The treatment of prisoners and their families clearly has significant implications in both political and communal terms. Every possible step should be taken to ensure that these are as positive as possible particularly where measures that could be taken have already been promised or are already provided for.

3 We do not have to rehearse the many reasons for allowing the transfer requests from Irish prisoners in Britain to prisons in Ireland. We welcome the transfers that have taken place and welcome the progress that has been made in overcoming some of the legal and procedural impediments to transfers and the invidious anomalies they can involve, not least those relating to temporary transfers. However that progress must be reflected in the early actual transfer of all those prisoners who want transfers and are clearly entitled to them.

4 More flexibility and sensitivity is needed in respect of compassionate leave and parole. We welcome steps in this direction which should be followed through as quickly and as fully as possible. Other improvements to the prison regime in respect of visiting arrangements, medical treatment, education and exercise facilities etc would also help.

5 A structural programme for early release looking at each prisoner's case should be brought forward. Such a programme would give some confidence to prisoners and their families that their situation was being treated positively and generously while also assuring victims and others that other considerations are not to be disregarded.

6 Early release initiatives have to be implemented with due sensitivity to the families of victims. The need for such sensitivity cannot be an excuse for doing nothing or little. It should be noted that many prisoners have been convicted for offences where there were no actual victims (eg possession, membership, conspiracy) and they should be ready candidates for early release. The implementation of an early release programme could also take account of such factors as disproportionate sentences, questionable convictions and family considerations.