

STATEMENT BY THE NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION ON PROPOSALS FOR DECOMMISSIONING

1. The NIWC welcomes the initiatives taken by the British and Irish governments to move the peace process forward. The Coalition particularly welcomes the statement made by Tony Blair in the House of Commons this week and his clear commitment to the people of Northern Ireland and recognition of the need to achieve an acceptable settlement of our political turmoil. Who could have failed to be touched by the words of young Margaret Gibney who says she has only known one year of peace in her life and so we particularly commend his concern about the future of all our young people in this troubled region. There is a pressing need for all of us to take risks for peace - not only the parties who are represented here in this Forum but also those who have chosen to exclude themselves, and even those who have not been elected. Peace building must encompass as many interests and groups and individuals as possible in Northern Ireland.

2. The Women's coalition also accepts that the International Body established by the British and Irish governments in 1995 was a genuine innovation to address the decommissioning issue. That report concluded that "the paramilitary organisations will not decommission any arms prior to all party negotiations (para 26), and that "decommissioning issue is a symptom of a larger problem : the absence of trust" (para 14). Significantly, the report devotes a section to confidence building measures and recommends that the decommissioning process is supported by confidence building measures (para 38). The Coalition believes that the International Body adopted a realistic stance with the objective of working to achieve peace in Northern Ireland. For the reality is that we are not dealing with defeated forces on any side of the equation of violence in the North. We are dealing with effective guerrilla movements that has the capacity to either continue or resort to violence. As the two governments recognised, reflecting the opinion of the International Body, voluntary and mutual decommissioning can only be achieved in the context of progress in comprehensive and inclusive political negotiations. We believe that we all have to work in a positive manner to achieve this.

3. Over the last year the Women's Coalition has listened with attention to those parties who have said in all sincerity and with good grounds that it is difficult, if not impossible to do business with those who have a gun in one hand, and a ballot box in the other. We accept the apprehension of those who say that if weapons are not put away then any agreements emerging out of the All-Party Talks can be blasted away by renewed outbreak of hostilities. But equally we believe that even in the hypothetical situation that decommissioning could be achieved in the morning, more weapons could still be acquired in the event of substantial political discontent; thus what we need to concentrate on is moulding and putting in place the building blocks of political accommodation which in turn can lead to genuine decommissioning. For like the two governments, it is our view that decommissioning if it is to be genuine - must be a voluntary initiative, carried out because there is a new sense of trust in the political system governing our divided society.

4 In essence, we believe that our priority should be placed on the need to decommission the mindsets that give rise to violence rather than indulging in the politics of blame, wishful thinking or intransigence. All of us see change as a threat but it doesn't have to be that way. The reality remains that without political progress decommissioning from whatever quarter will remain wishful thinking. The antipathy to decommissioning has not only been reflected in Republican and Loyalist history in Ireland over the years but can also be seen in international situations where there is consistent evidence of political negotiations taking place with armed groups prior to the achievement of decommissioning - South Africa; the Middle East; Spain; Algeria; Corsica - one can go on. Ralph Meyer & Cyril Ramaphosa.....

5. The Women's Coalition feels that if peace and political compromise is ever to become a reality in Northern Ireland that we have to leave the realm of unilateral demands behind us and engage in a real politick that puts an emphasis on commitment to dialogue with each other and most importantly dialogue on an inclusive basis. Certainly we demand an IRA cease-fire and the maintenance of the Loyalist cease-fire on the grounds of basic human rights. Certainly we call for a weapon-free Northern Ireland, as far as is politically and humanly possible. But most of all we call for a genuine political process of substantive negotiations and confidence building measures in order to win the peaceful and equitable future that we all aspire to.

6. In conclusion then, the Women's Coalition continues to support the recommendations in the International Body's Report, and welcomes the paper produced by the British and Irish Governments to take those recommendations forward. Like the Prime Minister, we also call for an unequivocal IRA cease-fire to enable Sinn Fein to enter the peace talks on the same basis as all the other parties around the table. This, we believe, is the path to genuine voluntary decommissioning. If we are ever to have the chance of devising a peaceful and stable society for our children then we believe that we must take risks for peace and to be required to acknowledge that there are few in this society that have not contributed to our politics of hatred, mistrust and division whether by word; deliberate misrepresentation; encouragement or by actions that have resulted in the culture of violence that we are now attempting to redress with the political talks.

June 1997