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## NEWS RELEASE NEWS RELEASE NEWS RELEASE

### WOMEN'S COALITION TO MEET PRIME MINISTER

A delegation from the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition will meet with the Prime Minister at 10 Downing Street on Wednesday 22 January. The meeting will take place at the request of the Women's Coalition who wish to seek the Prime Minister's views on the talks process to date and to represent their views and concerns on the failure to achieve substantive negotiations thus far.

The delegation comprises the two Talk's representatives Monica Mc Williams and Pearl Sagar, together with Bronagh Hinds and veteran trade unionist May Blood. Explaining why they requested today's Prime Ministerial meeting Monica McWilliams said,

"While the talks process has been going for over 6 months a mid term report would indicate insufficient progress towards substantive negotiations has been made. We wish to know if the Prime Minister is satisfied with progress to date. We will inform him of the deep concern of our divided communities that the prospect of peace is being allowed to drift further and further away against a rising tide of violent incidents in Northern Ireland and an apparent drift in leadership from the British Government."

Expanding on the role of the British Government Monica McWilliams said,

"There is a perception emerging that progress in the peace talks may have to await the outcome of a British general election. Our message to Mr Major is that such a perception is dangerous and that delay is not an option. It can only undermine further the credibility of the talks process and increase the possibility of a return to full scale violence on the streets of Northern Ireland. The Women's Coalition wishes to assure itself of the Prime Minister's determination to promote inclusive talks and substantive negotiations. We believe Government needs to take a more proactive role in moving the negotiation process beyond the current deadlock. Peace cannot be achieved with a laissez faire attitude."

"The Women's Coalition wants a restored IRA cease-fire. We also appreciate that the Prime Minister is compelled by legislation to admit Sinn Fein to the talks once an assured cease-fire is in place. In common with all other parties Sinn Fein must sign up to the Mitchell Principles. Once these conditions have been met their entry to the talks should be expedited."

Talks representative Pearl Sagar stated it was important to let the Prime Minister know of community feelings in Northern Ireland at this time.

"We are a long way from the political and economic optimism which we enjoyed all too briefly while the cease-fires were in place. Our communities despair as they witness the return of violence to the streets of Belfast and our business community cannot afford another Drumcree summer. Still the over-whelming majority of people want peace and they want to see substantive negotiations by all politicians taking place now!"

"The Women's Coalition recognise that peace can only be achieved with a sufficiency of consensus and it is disheartening to everyone in Northern Ireland that not all parties who are currently inside the talks are working to achieve that consensus. The talks require inclusive dialogue if they are to have any chance of success and recent attempts to exclude loyalist political parties serves only to weaken the possibility of achieving the widest possible consent."

Pearl Sagar explained that unlike other parties, the Women's Coalition represented all communities in their decision making process.

"We don't have a leader like the other parties, representing his own view as that of the community, but a leadership which listens to all communities and reflects their views at the talks process. Our fractured and divided communities still desire peace and although they despair at the mounting violence they speak with one voice in demanding peace now! It will not just be the para-militaries they blame if peace is not achieved, but those posturing politicians who claim to be negotiating peace but obstruct attempts to bring about meaningful dialogue at every turn."

"Recently, we have felt that the Women's Coalition has acted as the glue holding parties within the Talks process. It's bad enough to witness resurgent violence trying to wreck the talks process from the outside without having to witness attempts to wreck the process from within. That's why the Women's Coalition opposed the DUP and the UKU when they tried to exclude loyalist parties from the talks. The Prime Minister needs to recognise that not all the threats to the peace process are from outside the negotiating chamber and that Government has a responsibility to ensure that the process moves forward. Failure to exercise that responsibility is to fail all the people of Northern Ireland who so desperately want peace for themselves, for their children and for their communities."

**The End**

**Notes For Editors:**

1. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition was formed two months before the May Peace elections as a pressure group to promote the standing of women in politics. In May 1996 the Coalition stood for election and won two top up seats to the Peace Talks and Northern Ireland Forum. The Coalition is a broad based political grouping made up of women from both sides of the community.

2. Monica McWilliams is on sabbatical from her job as Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Ulster, Jordanstown. She has co-authored two books: "Bringing It Out In The Open: Domestic Violence in Northern Ireland" (HMSO 1993) and "The Civil and Criminal Justice Response to Domestic Violence" (HMSO 1996).

3. Pearl Sagar has worked as a Community Worker in East Belfast for a number of years. She is involved in a number of regeneration and enterprise initiatives including the East Belfast Festival and the board of the East Belfast Development Agency and the Community Development Centre. She is a member of the Women's Information Group, a federation of women's groups from all communities in Northern Ireland. The daughter of a coal miner she is proud of her working class background. She is a facilitator on the Steps to Excellence Programme run by the Seattle Pacific Institute.

4. Bronagh Hinds is the Director of the Ulster People's College and is Chair of the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform. A Law Graduate Bronagh is the author of a number of research and policy papers on child poverty, European affairs and politics. She is the former Director of Oxfam NI and Gingerbread NI. She served for 7 years as a commissioner on the Equal Opportunities Commission and was an executive member of the 1992 OSPHAL Commission on Northern Ireland.

5. May Blood is a Community Worker on the Shankill Road in Belfast. A former Mill worker May is a veteran Trade Unionist and has fought for workers rights and women's equality all her life.

6. The Women's Coalition will meet with the Prime Minister John Major & NIO Minister Michael Ancram at 2:30 in 10 Downing Street on Wednesday 22 January 1997.

7. The delegation will also meet separately with Labour Shadow leaders Tony Blair and Mo Mowlam at 12:30 am & 1:00 pm respectively.

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