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STATEMENT BY THE INDEPENDENT CHAIRMEN

March 25, 1998

This week the participants in the talks met in several formats: a review plenary, Strand One, Strand Two, the Business Committee, the Liaison Sub-committee on Confidence Building Measures and the Liaison Sub-committee on Decommissioning. In addition a series of bilateral meetings were held and will continue through tomorrow. We chaired the meetings in various formats and we met privately with each of the parties at least once and with some of them several times.

To bring this process to a swift and favourable conclusion, the participants have agreed to reconvene in plenary session from 10.30 am to 12.30 pm next Monday, March 30. I intend to then convene a Cross-Strand meeting at 2.00 pm on that day. The meetings will continue for five days next week, Monday through Friday, in a variety of formats, with the emphasis being on an intensive series of bilateral discussions. The meetings on Friday will not conflict with the Forum meeting on that day.

The participants will then reconvene on Monday, April 6, and will remain in session continuously until these negotiations are concluded. We hope and expect that can be accomplished by Thursday, April 9.

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We believe, and we have informed the participants, that the time for discussion is over. It is now time for decision.

The participants have been negotiating for nearly two years. They have engaged in vigorous debate. They have considered the issues at length and in detail.

The participants know what needs to be done. It's now up to them to do it.

We do not underestimate the complexity or the difficulty of the problems. But we are convinced that an agreement is within reach. We are also convinced that the overwhelming majority of the people of Northern Ireland want an agreement to establish peace, political stability and reconciliation.

We are totally committed to this effort. We are not considering any alternative plan in the event of failure because we believe that failure is unacceptable.

These next few weeks will be decisive. Those who are determined to wreck the process cannot be allowed to prevail. The success of these negotiations will require steady nerves and courageous leadership by the men and women in whose hands rests the future of Northern Ireland. We believe they will be up to the challenge.

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