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**Informal Ministerial Meeting
Belfast, 26 August 1997**

Draft Joint Statement

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Rt Hon Dr Marjorie Mowlam, M.P., and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Ray Burke, T.D., met in Belfast this evening to review preparations for the resumption of the multi-party talks on 9 September and the launch of political negotiations on 15 September.

In line with the commitment in their Joint Communiqué of 29 July to ensure that the mechanisms for decommissioning would be capable of being launched simultaneously with substantive negotiations, the Secretary of State and the Minister for Foreign Affairs signed an Agreement to establish the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning.

The Agreement will enable the Commission to begin preparatory work on decommissioning on a full operational basis alongside the start of substantive negotiations, on the lines set out in the Governments' joint note to the Plenary of 16 July.

Work is also underway to secure the appointment of members of the Commission. The Governments of Canada, Finland and the United States of America have been approached to identify suitable candidates. These are the countries which provided the Independent Chairmen for the multi-party negotiations. Preparations are also in hand for the establishment of Commission offices in Belfast and Dublin.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Secretary of State reaffirmed their commitment to the launch of substantive negotiations on 15 September. They reviewed preparations for the resumption of the Talks, and expressed the hope that all of the parties would work together with the two Governments on a constructive basis to complete the remainder of the opening Plenary on 9 September. They expressed their desire to see the negotiations move forward on a fully inclusive basis, with all participants committed to the principles of democracy and non-violence. They also reviewed the current security situation following the IRA ceasefire.

Both the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Secretary of State expressed their desire to see rapid progress achieved in the Talks towards a settlement that can command the support and allegiance of both communities in Northern Ireland, and called on all of the political parties to join them in this work.

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NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. The Agreement signed today is the first step by the two Governments to fulfil their obligations as set out in the Joint Communiqué of 29 July:

"In order to ensure that the mechanics on decommissioning are capable of being launched simultaneously with substantive negotiations. ... they have decided to complete the work needed for the signature of the international Agreement and other preparations for the establishment of an Independent Commission, so that the latter could be in a position to commence work on a full operational basis. ... alongside the start of substantive negotiations on 15 September."

2. The Agreement establishes the Commission as an independent international body to facilitate the decommissioning of arms on the lines set out by the two Governments. Its detailed provisions set out the Commission's functions: (to consult on decommissioning schemes, make proposals to the two Governments, oversee any scheme and report on progress); the funding arrangements (joint funding by the two Governments); composition (it will formally come into existence if only two of its members have been appointed); and record that it will be provided with appropriate immunities and privileges.

3. The Agreement will come into effect from a date agreed by the two Governments.

4. When the Commission sits on 15 September, it is envisaged it will invite the Talks participants to discuss the drafting of decommissioning schemes which will then be submitted to the two Governments for the Secretary of State to make and for the Government of the Republic of Ireland to give statutory provision for. This reflects the differences in format, but not in overall provision, of the two Decommissioning Acts 1997.