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Statement by Dr. Mowlam at opening of Press Conference

UTV - 9 January 1998

*W. Hackett
12.1.98*

Dr. Mowlam: I came here today because I feel I have a duty to the people of Northern Ireland, to use all of the legitimate means in my power to ensure that the peace process is taken forward. Let me also say, at the outset, that I've been contacted by both families and friends of victims of the people that I have spoken to this morning. Can I say right at the start that I would like to apologise to those who have taken offence at what I have done and thank others for supporting me and for giving support in terms of what I've done. I value both their comments. I did not come here to talk to prisoners for the sake of it. They were aware of that before I arrived this morning. They were ready to listen to me and I to listen to them. The message that I brought was very clear and simple. The only way that we are going to make progress towards a permanent peace in Northern Ireland is by taking a proactive stance and talking to reach the broadest possible agreement. I reminded the prisoners that the only way that their concerns can ever be addressed is through the negotiating skills of their political representatives at the talks. Issues that they raised with me, are concerns about confidence-building, progress in the talks, prisoners. I said to them these can be addressed in the context of an overall settlement but what we discussed I made careful, I drew out fifteen points that I wanted to emphasise to them this morning and I went through all fifteen with them. They have a copy so they know exactly what I said. I've got copies for you too so there can be no question as to the points that were raised. Let me say I made it totally clear that there won't be a settlement without everybody getting round the table and I also made it clear that the Mitchell Principles of democracy and non-violence require talks participants to put violence and the threat of violence behind them. I think the meeting that I had with them was useful this morning. I learned at first hand what their anxieties are. They in turn listened to the points that I've outlined. It is now for the prisoners to think about it, to think about what I've said and I hope that they will reach the decision to support the talks on Monday. There is, in my mind, no other way forward.

Question: Are you or did you tell them that there will be no early release this side of an agreement?

Dr. Mowlam: I use the words that I've just used with you in the talks process. I said we're not going to make any progress, no-one is going to get, they are not going to get anything if we don't have a talks process. I said talk is the only way forward. If we get confident in the talks process, if we get progress in the weeks and months ahead, then in that context a number of issues can be addressed. A point I've just made and I repeated it to them.

Question: Do you feel that there is potential, if everyone got on board, for movement within the communities?

Dr. Mowlam: I said there could be movement on issues. When we've got confidence, then issues can begin to be addressed. That is the important point.

Question: Are you satisfied that these men are actually interested in talking?

Dr. Mowlam: Yes I think I am. I don't know. I've only spent an hour or so discussing with them but I have to say that I have spent as much time discussing how to make progress in the talks as I did other issues if not more. It is the talks process. They understand, like most other people do in Northern Ireland, that it is very difficult to do anything in terms of confidence building, but unless we get an accommodation we'll have a continuation of the violence and they are very detailed questions, I don't want to go into the whole lot because we agreed we wouldn't discuss the details but there is no doubt that these men are interested in the talks. The progress of the talks is paramount to them.

Question: Did you succeed in your attempt today?

Dr. Mowlam: I don't know. I came here determined to make my message clear and simple. It is the only way forward by talking and we had frustratingly slow progress before Christmas and I think that in the talks I've had with all the parties this week, there is a desire

to move forward and we had a positive one with the UDP not in here, the prisoners believing that the talks would go anywhere. I've done my best to say to them that the talks are the only way forward and unless they participate nothing but negative events can happen in Northern Ireland. I don't know if I've succeeded. We will find out later today

Question: Do you think that this current situation poses a genuine threat to the ceasefire.

Dr. Mowlam: Yes. If I didn't believe that the UDP were serious, I wouldn't be here now. I believe that they had a vote in the prison and the prisoners said they had no faith in the talks. Now that put the UDP in a very difficult position. I want the talks to be as inclusive as possible. Faced with that situation and with the violence that we see at the moment, it will just exacerbate the situation in Northern Ireland because we have the deaths and victims that have already been killed over the Christmas period. If that escalates then it puts greater pressure on the talks process, so it is important that we have everybody in the talks determined to move it forward in the weeks ahead.

Question: What are you going to do if there are more killings, if they don't change their minds, what are the implications?

Dr. Mowlam: That is an implication not in what I just said. I think that is an unfair conclusion to the points I've made. There were no threats issued. They didn't threaten me. We discussed where they stood and where I stood and we now will wait to see if they reach a conclusion as to whether they will continue. No implied threats anywhere.

Question: Re: The Alliance Party

Dr. Mowlam: I've listened to the Alliance Party and met members last night to talk to them directly about the criticisms they have. I'm concentrating on the talks process. I'm concentrating on all parties to the talks. I believe by having the two sides talking we could move forward. I'm not listening to one extreme or the other extreme. I'm trying to build a talks process that gives us a chance to reach some agreement, some kind of settlement.

Question: What credibility do the Mitchell Principles have to them?

Dr. Mowlam: The Mitchell Principles, I discussed this morning, are essential to the talks process and signing up to them is an essential part to participating. Those that have agreed that Mitchell Principles are in the talks and we've made it very clear that if there is a violation of the Mitchell Principles, then there is a mechanism within the talks to address that.

Question: What did they ask, specifically, in terms of confidence-building measures and also do you think that the Irish Government signal yesterday to them was helpful?

Dr. Mowlam: I think confidence-building measures are crucial to the process because unless we build trust and respect we are not going to move the process forward. But I think confidence-building measures are sometimes used in a very generalised way. I mean we've introduced certain pieces of legislation which we were committed to and what I call our equality agenda, not as confidence-building, although obviously I hope they will build confidence, and the term I think is used in various ways. But there is no doubt that there has been a desire to have confidence-building measures focussed in the Liaison Committee of the talks process. I welcome that, because at the moment when I do anything, both sides say it is not sufficient for them. So I hope that if it is in the talks process they can discuss and reach some kind of conclusions themselves.

Question: Re: The views of the Irish Government with regard to prisoners.

Dr. Mowlam: I can't give reassurance as to the behaviour of the other parties that participate in the talks. The Irish are a political party, they have their views, they make their decisions. What I can give them and I did say to them is that we will do all we can to move the talks forward. I think there is now a general agreement among the parties that we still have an opportunity, I don't know what way the decision will go, but if we manage to get people around the table on Monday, we have a chance still to move this process forward. I don't believe that it is lost. I believe that there is still a chance to move it forward and we will do all we can so I offered them that reassurance yes.

Question: Was there a metaphorical gun held to your head today?

Dr. Mowlam: Can I say to you that there was no metaphorical gun at my head. I talked to the political parties this week. The UDP indicated that they had difficulty because people in the Maze prison had lost faith in the talks process. I was determined to do all I could to make the talks inclusive on Monday and putting my case face to face, arguing it through with them, I thought was the best way of doing it. So I'm here. No guns, no metaphorical guns, a very constructive, informed debate.

Question: Are the prisoners a very important figure in the talks process?

Dr. Mowlam: They have always been an important part of the talks process but they are not central. What is central is getting agreement between the parties in the talks process. They are an important part but not essential.

Question: Are you feeling more optimistic now ?

Dr. Mowlam: I don't know. I've learned in Northern Ireland not to prejudge things so I'm not more pessimistic than I was yesterday but I've learned not to be more optimistic until I know exactly what comes out. I don't prejudge people. Both sides are very keen to make their own minds up and I will wait until I hear what the decision is.

Question: Did you speak with the IRA about their ceasefire?

Dr. Mowlam: Yes the difficulty was that all the other groups in the prison then wanted to see me while I'm here and so what I did was that I don't see people that aren't on ceasefire but both the IRA and the UVF I went to and said "I'm here to talk to the UDA because of the problems in the talks, its those problems I'm interested in, but I went in for a couple of minutes and both groups said "keep going".

Question: Did the UDA and the UFF guarantee to give you the signal later today?

Dr. Mowlam: No there was no guarantees at all from either side. But they said there was room for talk so hope there is a decision and you may be right in your question. I may be too optimistic that I may hear something today. There was no commitment made as to when.

Question: What will you be doing on Monday and have the sides guaranteed to be present?

Dr. Mowlam: What I can tell you is that what is important is that there is as much substance to Monday as possible and I don't want to mislead people as to what form that will take. We are doing everything we can to make sure that Monday has a bite to it. But as you know, as well as anybody else, there is paper in Strand One, there is paper in Strand Two, and so there are concrete, substantive things to discuss. In relation to your question, no guarantees were given on either side. We want to be sure that we've done all we can to move the talks forward.

Question: Do you think as a last chance that there is a possibility of other meetings between you and the prisoners?

Dr. Mowlam: I never talk of last chances. This was a commitment in relation to the talks on Monday. A specific problem was being faced and a specific question was being addressed. In the future none of us know where we will go.

Question: With regard to the remark about the IRA and "keep going", could you elaborate on that?

Dr. Mowlam: No because we didn't have a discussion. I mean I was caught between the position of being asked and not wanting to respond unfairly, not wanting to come back next week and break the whole thing again. So I said hello but there was no great meeting and I didn't come in here to talk to them, I came in here specifically in relation to the UDP.

Question: Re: previous discussions

Dr. Mowlam: In answer to your first question. When I was in discussions with the UDP and we couldn't find any way of offering anything that they could take to the prisoners that they believed would convince them, I then went out of the room, went and saw my Permanent Secretary, talked to the prison services phoned them to tell them what I was doing, as you know that is the normal practise and they were informed and saw no problem. Mr Blair was in the EU Presidency at that time so it was not possible to do so but if there had been any doubt I'm sure it would have went further. In answer to your second question, no, it just shows not that there is acknowledgment of political prisoners but an acknowledgement that the prison situation here is different, which I think everyone accepts.

Question: Re: Fifteen points

Dr. Mowlam: Well I spoke to the Press Secretary who I'm sure will give you the fifteen points I made to them. I am saying to you directly I did not offer any guarantees, anything else, those are the fifteen points that I have made. I put them in writing so there couldn't be any misunderstanding and so that is the answer to that.

Question: Where to now?

Dr. Mowlam: Well my reading of the situation is that we've got some trouble to go yet to make sure that everybody understands what the situation is. I don't know what will happen. We will wait to see. But I try not to leave any stone unturned.

Dr. Mowlam: I don't quite see, as I said in my opening comment, that I talked to a fair many people since I said I was coming in, many of them who have lost family members as a result particularly of the people I was talking with and I wanted to apologise as I have this morning for affecting their cause because clearly talking to them, they found it very difficult. But what I also want to emphasise is that there were many others who lost family members who said "do it" because this is the only way that we are going to be able to move

the process forward. So it is not easy but I am here because they are part of getting a settlement ²⁸ that everybody in Northern Ireland will, as a result, have a better future.