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Comments by Prime Minister Tony Blair at Omagh

Tuesday 25 August 1998

Prime Minister: First of all, I want to again express our horror and outrage and sense of grief at this terrible tragedy. We can only guess that the extraordinary trauma that people in this town, and in the towns and lands outlying it, have been going through over these past few days and will go through in the future. As I have said to some of the people I have talked to just now, the condolences and sympathy and sense of solidarity is shared not just throughout the UK, throughout Northern Ireland, the Irish Republic but is actually shared throughout the world. I also would like here specifically and particularly to pay tribute to the work and the dedication and the commitment of the police, the emergency services, the hospital, the doctors, the staff, everybody who was involved in coping with the aftermath of that tragic and evil act. I know, and understand only too well, what little consolidation new security measures, even political progress, can be for the victims of the Omagh bomb. But because I believe it is right and because I think in some ways we can make a difference, I think it is right to address these issues.

We do have, in a real sense, a different situation for co-operation and security today. First of all today, ourselves and the Irish Government are working more closely than ever before. We work in step, one with the other and that is a big and welcome change from the past. Secondly, we know that we are dealing now with groups prepared to carry out outrages such as this, who have no political support, no base, no votes, no representation in any part of the community. They are in a real sense in the whole of the island of Ireland outcasts from the community and people rightly expect that we will take whatever measures we can, properly and legitimately, to bring those responsible to justice. These circumstances offer us the opportunity to take action provided that it is clearly defined, properly thought out and will actually improve the efficiency of the measures we can take against terrorism.

I can say to you today that the speaker has agreed to the Government's request to recall Parliament. This will be for two days - one in the House of Commons, one in the House of Lords - next Wednesday and Thursday. This is necessary because our legal advice is that the changes that are making are of a sufficiently serious nature that the only legally watertight and foolproof way of proceeding is to proceed by way of primary rather than secondary legislation. To proceed simply by way of secondary legislation might be open to legal challenge and I think it is important we put that beyond doubt.

In addition, as I shall say to you in a moment, we shall use the reconvening of Parliament to put through a further piece of anti-terrorist legislation which has been fully prepared for some time but has not yet being legislated for in respect of those planning to commit terrorist acts abroad. The changes of legislation in respect of terrorist acts carried out in the UK will mirror closely those that are to be passed in the Irish Republic. As we have indicated to you before, some of the measures that the Irish Government propose are already enshrined in UK law. For example, the detention of suspects for a longer than normal period, inferences from the failure of a person to mention certain facts and a number of specific offences such as the training of people and the making and use of firearms. However, there is a clear need, now that it is plain that we are dealing with this small, wholly unsupported, wholly unrepresentative residual group of extremists to tighten our law in relation to what is needed to secure a conviction for membership of a proscribed terrorist organisation. These changes, relating to the rules of evidence, will apply to those groups that are specifically designated.

In particular, though you must, as you will appreciate, await the publication of the Bill for the full changes that are to be made, we can say now that the law will be changed first to allow the evidence of a senior police officer to be admissible evidence for the purposes of convicting someone of being a member of a proscribed organisation. Secondly, to allow corroboration of that evidence, an inference of guilt to be drawn from the refusal, not merely to mention something that is then later relied upon as a defence, but to allow an inference of guilt to be drawn from any refusal to answer any relevant question, in the course of interrogation or subsequently, or indeed any refusal to cooperate with any relevant inquiry.

In addition to that, there are other matters in respect of the admissibility of evidence of an important nature which is still the subject of discussions with the law officers and others.

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Some of these originate in suggestions that have been made to us within the last twenty-four hours by the Chief Constable of the RUC. We will examine those very carefully, too, with a view to including those that we believe it right to do so in the legislation that we propose. It is also, as I indicated to you a moment or two ago, our intention to use this opportunity to include in the Bill legislation that will make it, for the first time, a specific offence in the UK of conspiring to commit terrorist offences outside of the UK. Such a proposition was the intention of the previous Government, has been the intention of this Government, it has been strongly pressed upon us by many States who are concerned at what they believe to be UK-based nationals of their countries using the UK to plan terrorist acts abroad. In the wake of recent terrorist activity abroad, this is a timely and right move to underscore our total commitment to defeating terrorism wherever it is plotted or executed. As I said to you a moment or two ago, of course, measures in respect of security can be of scant consolation to those who have been the victims of this appalling terrorist outrage. But we have the determination, not just here, but in the Irish Republic too, to take whatever measures we can to bring those responsible for justice and more than that, we have a political process that has the overwhelming support of the majority of people everywhere. There is no doubt at all about the desire of people here for peaceful co-existence in Northern Ireland. There is no doubt at all of their clearly expressed will that the debates and discussions that should and will form part of the political debate should be conducted by peaceful means and that the days of the men of violence must be consigned to the past to where they belong. I have seen for myself today, not merely the terrible damage that this outrage resulted upon. I have seen and I felt too the spirit that there is here, and not just in Omagh but in the whole of Northern Ireland - to make sure that the future contains no more Omaghs, no more terrorist outrages, no more killings and maimings of innocent people, but that we build the future of peace and hope and prosperity, that people here in Northern Ireland deserve and that the whole of the world wants to see as their future. Thank you.

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Replies by the Prime Minister to Questions from Reporters (the questions were for the most part inaudible):

Prime Minister:

Question 1: That is why we must proceed in a careful and thought-out way and that we have done. The big difference now is that we know that we are dealing with a small residual group of extremists that want to carry on this violence and we know too that when we are acting now, we are not just acting as the British Government. This is the Irish Republic taking action in the Irish Republic and the British Government taking action in respect of the UK, and those two big changes provide the context in which we can take measures that otherwise, of course, are of a very draconian and fundamental nature but we believe that they are right and justified in these circumstances and we have carefully thought them through so that they relate specifically to the way that we ensure people who are members of terrorist organisations are convicted of the offences if they are indeed guilty of them.

Question 2: We will make sure that those organisations who are designated and who will be covered by this legislation are very clearly covered and, of course, it is only in respect of organisations that are proscribed that we wish to take this action and I think it is important to emphasise that, as I believe there is this sense in the Irish Republic, that we are dealing now with a small group of people who it is right that we take every measure we possibly can to hunt down and bring to justice and to make sure that their organisation, as an organisation, cannot operate properly in the future and these measures, relying as they do to changes and evidences to make it easier to secure convictions, are, I believe, the right route for us to go.

Question 3: They have no political acceptance so far as I am concerned at all. I described them earlier as outcasts from the community and I believe that to be true, I believe that to be true of every single recognisable strand of opinion in Northern Ireland and indeed throughout the whole of the island of Ireland.

Question 4: The Good Friday Agreement has always been the agreement that forms totality. As we have said to everybody, the Agreement as a whole and all the provisions of

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that, of course, should be implemented. Again, I emphasise to you, since this is occasionally being said, I have read it in some of the newspapers - there is no question of any provisions in relation to sentences applying to any act committed after the date of the Good Friday Agreement and people should be well aware of that and in any event, as I have already explained on many occasions, any questions of prisoners are dealt with under a detailed set of procedures that require individual consideration by the relevant bodies and authorities.

Question 5 (from the Vice Chairman of the Council in Omagh): (As regards) the property owners here who are looking in - can you give them an assurance that no stone will be left unturned to see that they get all the help and assistance to get back to business and for the rest of the town of Omagh?

Prime Minister: Well there are two very important concerns that have been raised with me specifically by the people of Omagh that I have talked to today. The first is in relation to the hospital and the second is in relation to the businesses concerned. Without disclosing the details of what we can do at the present time, let me say that I understand very much the concern on both counts and I will obviously be discussing that with the Secretary of State, as she will be with yourself and other local representatives, and we are well aware of our obligations to the people of Omagh after what they have suffered.

Question 6: I very much wanted to come on the Sunday straight after the bombing and I think there was a very strong feeling at the time that there was already such enormous pressure on the support services that it was better to leave it some time, particularly leave it in order to come and not merely express my sympathy but tell people specifically what we were going to do. As I said to some of the people I have just been talking to now in the crowd there, this won't be last occasion upon which I come and the best proof that I can give of my sense, not just of condolence but of solidarity with people here, is to make sure that the things that they wanted and needed for the future are given to them.

END.