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Stormont Castle, Belfast

21 July 1975

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STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND, MR MERLYN REES MP,
IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS ON MONDAY, 21 JULY 1975

On 10 July in South Armagh near the border village of Foxhill the Security Forces saw what appeared to be a suspect device possibly containing explosives. This was kept under observation until 17 July when an Army patrol went to deal with it. As they approached an explosive was detonated from a distance. Four soldiers were killed and one was seriously wounded. A man has been arrested and has appeared in court charged with murder.

The House will join with me in expressing sympathy for the relatives.

The Crossmaglen PIRA claimed responsibility. They have used the excuse that they were avenging the death in Bessbrook on 4 June of one of their members and the death of a man in Belfast on 13 July. These are specious justifications. In the Bessbrook incident a man was shot by the Security Forces whilst trying to throw a bomb into a crowded bar. The Crossmaglen Provisionals had set up their ambush at least three days before the Belfast incident.

Overall there has been a substantial reduction in the violence attributable to the Provisional IRA. It has never ceased completely and particularly in the South Armagh area shootings and booby traps have continued, although less frequently and less successfully.

The Government are very conscious of the desire - indeed the longing - of the people of Northern Ireland from all parts of the community, for peace and a return to normality. The Government have therefore responded sincerely to the reduction in

activity by the PIRA by a very substantial lowering of activity by the Army but without lowering its guard.

In normal circumstances violence should be dealt with by the police and by bringing criminals before the courts and not by detention without trial. So far in 1975 the police have charged 640 persons with security type offences including 66 with murder and 59 with attempted murder. Already a man has been charged with the murder of one of the soldiers killed last Thursday.

Accusations have been made of so-called Army harassment. I pay tribute to the goodwill and restraint shown by the security forces in carrying out our policy of maintaining a level of security force activity related to the level of violence. They have done neither more nor less than this. They have my full support.

As I have said before I want an end to detention.

But this will depend on the progress towards the cessation of violence and on the continued success of the police in bringing criminals before the courts. It will, however, clearly be necessary to retain for some time to come the power to detain people and I will not hesitate to use this power if I am satisfied that it is needed.

In the light of all these factors I must under the law exercise my own judgment on releases. I have to make the judgment on each individual case balancing the right of the community to be protected against the right of the individual to his freedom. Decisions are difficult but I will not shirk them. I do not know whether the Provisionals from Crossmaglen want to see detainees released, but I will not be deflected from what I think is right.

The big questions I have to ask myself are: whether the leaders of the Provisional IRA are able to control their followers, for example, in South Armagh; whether such actions do not make the ceasefire meaningless; and whether they will not provoke reactions in retaliation against innocent Catholics. With every incident and each new Provisional statement such as the one they have made today there is speculation about the end of the ceasefire or changes in government policy.

The Government's policy is clear and has been explained fully in this House. It is that we are looking for a lasting and permanent peace and for a genuine and

sustained cessation of violence which would create a new situation and make further progress possible on the basis of the statements I have made. The Provisionals political aims as restated today are well known. Provisional Sinn Fein is free to pursue them by peaceful and legitimate means. I must make it clear that the Government have not entered into any agreement.

I have already informed the House of the changing nature of violence in Northern Ireland in recent months. All those who engage in violence in Northern Ireland should be considering their position. The British Government want peace in Northern Ireland as do most of the people there. What is needed is a positive and continuing response from the Provisional IRA and from other groups involved.