

## STATEMENT - NORTHERN IRELAND PRISON PROTESTS: 3 MARCH 1981

I will, with permission, Mr Speaker, make a statement on the latest developments in the protests by Republican prisoners in Northern Ireland Prisons.

On 1 March one of the prisoners at Maze refused food and declared himself to be on hunger strike. A statement attributed to the prisoners said that this action was being taken, once again, in support of their demand for political status.

Yesterday, the Republican prisoners still taking part in the dirty protest at Maze and Armagh prisons - 439 in all - let it be known that they intended to stop fouling their cells. 240 men prisoners have, accordingly, already been moved into clean cells and provided with clean bedding. The rest will be moved as quickly as further cells become available. The 28 women prisoners will all be in clean cells by this evening.

The Government welcomes this decision by the prisoners to put an end to the degrading conditions which they have imposed upon themselves. But, in another statement, the

prisoners have indicated that their action is being taken in support of demands for changes in the prison regime which would give effect to their demand for political status. In this they differ from those 80 prisoners who have stopped protesting altogether since the last hunger strike ended on 18 December. That group are now receiving the full range of privileges and facilities which I described in my statement of 4 December, including that of association, and of wearing their own leisure clothing of an approved type, in the evening and at weekends. That regime remains available for all who choose to take advantage of it: nothing has been added to and nothing taken away from my statement of 4 December.

The claim for political status has been rejected in clear terms by the European Commission of Human Rights, by successive Governments and by all sides in this House. I wish to make it clear, once again, in case there is any doubt anywhere about the Government's position, that we shall not give way on the issue of political status under pressure of further protest action, whatever form this takes and whether it is inside or outside the prisons.