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SENT BY TEL 15/5

10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

15 May 1981

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Thank you for your telegram of 13 May about the hunger strike at the Maze Prison. I understand your concern. I fully share it.

The Government have repeatedly made clear how much they regret the loss of life through all forms of violence in Northern Ireland. The Government is not the inflexible party in this issue. The Provisional IRA, at whose behest the hunger strike is taking place, have stated and restated from the beginning that they would call off the strike only if the Government were to concede all five of their demands. What they want is not prison reforms, but a special different status for some prisoners. This the Government cannot concede, since it would encourage further blackmail and support for terrorism. We cannot treat persons convicted of criminal offences as prisoners of war, which is what they want.

In contrast, the Government had demonstrated flexibility in a number of ways. We introduced important and humane changes in the prison regime last year. We took the initiative to de-escalate the dirty protest in January, and responded promptly to the ending of the dirty protest in March, cutting the rate of loss of remission by half. We allowed the three Dublin TDs, the ECHR representatives and the Pope's representative to visit the Maze in the hope that they could find some way

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to persuade Mr. Sands and the other hunger strikers to cease their action. I hope the remaining hunger strikers will even now respond to the Pope's message.

You make a number of points about the prison population in Northern Ireland. I am very aware of them, as is the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. We are committed to maintaining an enlightened and humanitarian prison regime, and I believe we do so. We are ready to listen to representations from responsible quarters - including for example the European Commission on Human Rights - on all aspects of the environment for all conforming prisoners: but we cannot yield on the issue of political justification for murder and violence and of prisoner of war status for those who commit such crimes.

Like you, I am anxious to avoid all further needless deaths in Northern Ireland from whatever part of the community. You in particular will I am sure appreciate the heavy load my colleagues and I bear in discharging our responsibilities. But the solution does not lie in our hands. It lies with the hunger strikers themselves, their families and advisers. More directly, it lies with the leaders of the Provisional IRA, who have taken a cold-blooded decision that the unfortunate men now fasting in prison are of more use to them dead than alive. This seems to me the most immoral and inflexible decision anyone could take.

Since you released your telegram to the press, I am sure you will not mind my publishing this reply.

(SGD) MT

The Most Reverend Tomas O Fiaich, Archbishop of Armagh