

CONFIDENTIAL



(1)

PRIME MINISTER

*Prime Minister*

*Apex that message at B may mine?*

*(I will include text at A - which is not suitable for leaving with the President - in your briefs.)*

HUNGER STRIKES AT HMP MAZE AND ARMAGH

*your briefs.)*

*Paul*

We now expect that a second hunger strike will begin on 1 March, which would mean that the crisis would be reached over Easter. It might be initiated by a single striker, the protesters' leader, Robert Sands: or by a small group of perhaps four, at the Maze. Either way, we could expect further hunger strikers, including some women at Armagh, to join in later on.

2. The declared objective of the hunger strike is, once again, "political status" and treatment as "prisoners of war". The hunger strikers themselves, and the leadership of the PIRA and INLA, probably realise that HMG will not grant these demands. Their belief must be that the Republican cause will be the better off for the addition of one or more martyrs. They presumably hope to win advantage for that cause from the strains that a hunger strike, still more a death, would place on the community in Northern Ireland.

3. If a hunger strike does begin, then there are three main differences from the position last October. First, this strike will take place in the aftermath of the failure of the first. The fact of that failure, and of its having occurred in the face of a Government position based on firm principles, is well understood in the community and will be a source of great strength to us this time. Second, the programme of street protests in support of the hunger strikers can be expected to have small beginnings, building up to a climax at Easter, not least because the organisers recognise the difficulties they face in mobilising mass support. But it is clear that, unlike last time, these demonstrations may seek rather than avoid confrontation. The security forces have a great deal of experience in dealing with this and they are ready.

4. Third, the strike will be taking place in an atmosphere whipped up by the activities of Dr Paisley. He has planned a programme of 11 rallies, two of which have taken place already, culminating in what he hopes will be a mass turnout at Stormont on 28 March. Three of these rallies are in choice DUP strongholds, but five lie within UUP-controlled areas. (Surprisingly in view of the efforts that the DUP have been making to build up support, no rally is planned in Fermanagh or elsewhere close to the border.) Quite apart from the

/heightened political tension

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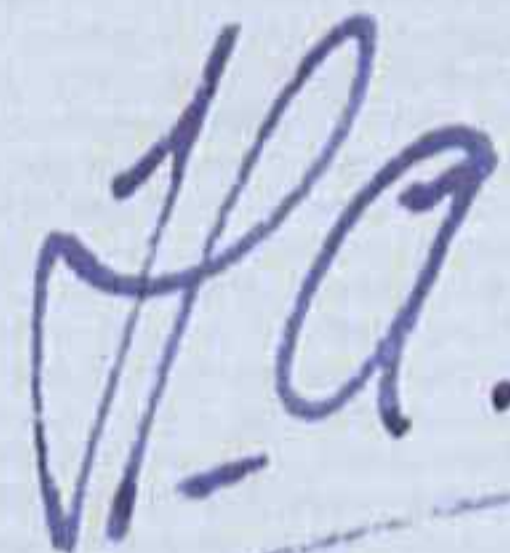
heightened political tension that these rallies will generate, they will present opportunities for inter-sectarian conflict.

5. Against that background I have considered how to deal with the hunger strike. First, the Government has already set out in some detail both the principles by which it was guided in dealing with the first hunger strike (no political status, no differential regime within the prisons, no surrender of control within the prisons, but a commitment to maintaining, and where practical improving, prison conditions) and the way in which these principles are put into practice in the Northern Ireland Prison Service. We must continue to stand by those principles and practices.

6. Second, a great deal will depend, particularly in view of the character of the demonstrations forecast, on the sensitivity with which these are handled by the security forces. They learned a great deal from the last hunger strike and I have every confidence in them. Third, notwithstanding our success in dealing with the earlier hunger strike, a sustained effort will be needed again to put the Government's position across and I intend, with my Ministers and officials, to keep in close touch with community leaders. To support this personal activity, a programme is being drawn up to brief, and provide facilities for, Members of Parliament, the media and posts overseas. I do not intend to initiate this public effort until after it is clear a strike has begun: we do not want to suggest that we expect a strike, still less that we fear it. But we must react quickly once it starts.

7. In the meantime there are two items of immediate concern. The attitude of the United States is of great importance to us. Your brief contains material on Northern Ireland but, to supplement this, ... I attach a speaking note for you either to use or to leave with the President. Second, I think it is important that Mr Haughey should be aware of the Government's attitude before the strike begins. This ... might best be done by the Ambassador, making it clear that he speaks on your personal behalf. I attach (at Annex A) a speaking note for use with the President which, with only minor amendment (at draft B) could go to the Ambassador in Dublin. I should be grateful if your office would confirm to the Foreign Office that the telegram may go.

I am sending copies of this minute to the Lord Chancellor, the Foreign Secretary, the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence and to Sir Robert Armstrong.



HA

23 February 1981

SPEAKING NOTE FOR USE IN USA

As you will know there is a renewed threat of a hunger strike at the Maze Prison by one or more prisoners demanding, to quote the statement put out in their name, "to be treated as political prisoners".

2. It is a matter of great regret that the ending of the last hunger strike on 18 December, without loss of life, did not lead as we had hoped to the phasing out of all forms of protest and the implementation of the regime which was and remains available to non-protesting prisoners. Details of this regime were set out in the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland's statements of 4 and 19 December and in more detail in the 32-page document on the Northern Ireland Prison Regime, copies of which can be made available to the President's Office by H M Ambassador.

3. Everything the prisoners have said and done since 19 December has made it clear that the only regime which they are prepared to accept without protest is that which incorporates their 5 demands, ie a prisoner-of-war regime.

4. We are not prepared to concede these demands and we believe the prisoners know it. We think that their object now is to bring about one or more deaths of hunger strikers in order to inflame community passions. All the evidence is that community support for the protesters is at its lowest ebb. If there is another hunger strike we expect it to be accompanied by a campaign of Provisional IRA and INLA violence designed to provoke the Protestant community whose mood is more volatile than at the time of the last hunger strike.

5. HM Government's position remains on the record in the statements by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to which I have referred: no political status; no concession to the 5 demands; the regime described at the ending of the last hunger strike remains available; we are committed to keeping prison conditions under review from a humanitarian point of view.

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6. The forces of law and order will act with sensitivity as well as firmness to protect the community from violence from whatever quarter arising out of any renewed hunger strike. We shall do all we can to discourage moderate and rational people from being taken in by Provisional IRA propaganda. I am sure that we have your support in this. I thought I ought to let you know how we see the situation at this stage and of course if there is anything you feel you can do to reinforce the actions we shall be taking to inform those who might have influence on the prisoners, this would be very helpful.

DRAFT TELEGRAM TO DUBLIN

Please pass following message from the Prime Minister to the Taoiseach.

"As you will know there is a renewed threat of a hunger strike at the Maze Prison by one or more prisoners demanding, to quote the statement put out in their name, "to be treated as political prisoners".

2. It is a matter of great regret that the ending of the last hunger strike on 18 December, without loss of life, did not lead as we had hoped to the phasing out of all forms of protest and the implementation of the regime which was and remains available to non-protesting prisoners. Details of this regime were set out in the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland's statements of 4 and 19 December and in more detail in the 32-page document on the Northern Ireland Prison Regime.

3. As HM Ambassador has explained to your officials, everything the prisoners have said and done since 19 December has made it clear that the only regime which they are prepared to accept without protest is that which incorporates their 5 demands, ie a prisoner-of-war regime.

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