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NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

GREAT GEORGE STREET,

LONDON SW1P 3AJ

Ireland



La. Pmt

5 February 1981

Michael Alexander Esq
10 Downing Street
London SW1

Prime Minister

Already undertaken, I fear but
you may like to be aware of the
written answer.

Dear Michael,

mt Pmt 5/2

MAZE PRISON

My Secretary of State wishes the Prime Minister to be aware of events in the Maze Prison since my letter of 23 January and of likely developments.

By 15 January, 96 prisoners formerly on the dirty protest had been progressively moved (as part of the normal cleaning cycle) to furnished cells. They appeared willing to keep their cells clean and undamaged. On 23 January (as earlier reported), 20 of them indicated that they wished to be regarded as "non-protesting prisoners". But they did so in terms which made it perfectly clear that they were seeking to establish a regime which gave them in substance the different political status sought by the hunger strikers. These 20 prisoners were allowed the wash, shave and haircut which they requested, and were told that prison-supplied civilian clothing was available, but they were not, as they had asked, issued with their own leisure clothing. This, as we have made clear all along, is a privilege available only to conforming prisoners for wear outside working hours. The prisoners' reaction to this on the evening of 27 January was for all 96 to smash up their furniture and damage their cells. They have all since reverted to the dirty protest, in which just over 400 prisoners are now involved. The process of unwinding the dirty protest has, therefore, for the time being at least come to a halt.

We have good reason to believe that there is now a significant risk of a renewed hunger strike. If one were to begin, we could expect notice of it in the next few days, and the likeliest start date would be in the middle of February, ie so that the crisis was reached, for maximum effect, by Easter. It cannot be assumed that in this event PIRA would again maintain a tacit ceasefire: if they did not, we might expect to see a shift of emphasis in their intentions to attacks on eg members of the judiciary, civil servants and politicians, with further PIRA activity on the mainland and the continent. The security forces are, of course, fully aware of and prepared for the possibility of another hunger strike.

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... My Secretary of State believes that it is desirable in these circumstances to put before Parliament, in answer to an arranged Question, a clear statement of the Government's actions leading up to the events of 27 January and a firm re-statement of the principles by which we would again stand against another hunger strike. A copy of this answer, which is being given today, is enclosed. The answer has been carefully worded so as not to put the Government in a false position with regard to the continuation (for reasons of which the Prime Minister is fully aware) of special category status for those sentenced before that regime was ended.

... I am sending a copy of this letter (with copies of my letter of 23 January as appropriate) to the Private Secretaries to the Lord Chancellor, the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Secretary of State for Defence and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours, etc,

R. A. Harrington

R A HARRINGTON

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Written No 118

MR TONY DURANT (Reading North): To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the protests by republican prisoners in Her Majesty's Prison, Maze.

MR ATKINS

On 4 December I described (Official Report, c 375) the normal regime applicable in Northern Ireland prisons, and I placed a fuller account in the Library of the House. On 19 December I described (Official Report, c 1031) what would happen to any prisoners at the Maze and Armagh Prisons who ended their protests.

When an individual protesting prisoner says that he wishes to conform with prison rules, having washed, shaved and had a haircut, he is normally given civilian clothing supplied by the prison (in place of the former prison uniform), moved from his cell to a wing containing other conforming prisoners and medically examined for fitness to work. He is then, if fit, allocated suitable activities and work (including of course work related to the servicing of the prison). As a normal prisoner he then qualifies for privileges including that of wearing out of working hours his own leisure clothing of an approved type for which he may send. This procedure has been followed by the 69 prisoners who have ended their protest since 19 December.

The hunger strike at the Maze and Armagh Prisons ended on 18 and 19 December. The last so-called Loyalist protesters at the Maze ended their protest on Monday 2 February. The dirty protest, however, continues: at the Maze 407 are currently involved, 59 fewer than on 19 December and 98 fewer than the peak number reached early in the hunger strike; 29 women prisoners are involved in the dirty protest at Armagh.

It had been my hope that the ending of the hunger strike before Christmas would lead speedily to the ending of all the other protests. Since it did not do so, the prison authorities at the Maze, with the full backing of the Government, took the initiative to move groups of protesting prisoners into clean and furnished cells, without waiting for these prisoners to say that they intended to end their protest: and in three stages, on 12, 13 and 15 January, a total of 96 prisoners were moved into clean furnished cells at the Maze, which they then kept clean. All protesting prisoners at the Maze (and, later, at Armagh) were told in writing about what was being done, and why. A reduced scale of punishment was applied to those prisoners who kept their cells and furniture clean in that their loss of remission was reduced by a half and one parcel a month was made available. Again, all the protesting prisoners at the Maze were told in writing about these developments; that furnishings would be similarly supplied to other

protesting prisoners as soon as they had indicated, by refraining from fouling their cells, that they wanted it; and that the next step in the establishment of a normal regime and the privileges that go with it would be the issue of civilian clothing supplied by the prison to those who would wear it.

On 23 January, 20 of the 96 prisoners indicated that they were prepared to wash, shave and have their hair cut, and to keep their cells clean. They said, however, that they were not prepared to move from their existing cells nor to take part in work other than that of cleaning their own cells and receiving full-time education. They also said that they were not prepared to wear prison issue civilian clothing unless their own leisure clothing was provided at the same time. They were thus demanding a regime for themselves which was and was intended to be different from the normal regime of the prison, particularly in respect of work, and the wearing of their own leisure clothing which is a privilege available only to conforming prisoners for wear outside working hours. In the circumstances, the authorities had no alternative but to refuse its issue to these 20 prisoners. They were, however, allowed, as is their right, to wash, shave and have a hair cut, which they did: and they were told that civilian clothing supplied by the prison was available, which they did not accept. On 27 January

all 96 prisoners, at about 8.00 pm, started to damage their cells and their furniture. They were therefore moved to the nearest available empty cells in each of the two respective wings, some of which had still not been cleaned from their previous occupancy. All 96 were however put into clean cells the following day but these they then started to foul.

I regret that the successive steps taken in January have not led, as I hoped, to the ending of the dirty protest. The Government believes that the normal prisons regime, the privileges that go with it, and the steps by which the protesting prisoners could have secured those privileges by progressively accepting the normal regime have been fully and clearly explained. We shall continue our efforts to bring an end to the protest on this basis.

The principles by which the Government has stood in the face of the protests at the Maze and Armagh prisons still stand. It will not concede that it should now establish within the normal Northern Ireland prison regime a special set of conditions for particular groups of prisoners. It will not surrender control of what goes on in the prisons to a particular group of prisoners. It will not concede the demand for political status or recognise that murder and violence are less

● culpable because they are claimed to be committed for political motives.