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cc on Maze file

NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

GREAT GEORGE STREET,

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5 December, 1980

Michael Alexander Esq.,
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Prinie Amster

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Dear Michael,

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NORTHERN IRELAND: PRISON HUNGER STRIKE

You may like to have a summary of the immediate responses to the statement made yesterday by my Secretary of State in a written answer to a PQ, about the prison regime in relation to the hunger strike.

The two most important reactions are of course those of the Irish Government and of the SDLP through John Hume. The Irish Government's statement (appended) is only moderately constructive. It contains no call to the strikers to desist, nor any hint of denial of the validity of the claim to political status. The expression of hope that people concerned with the issue will take up our willingness to discuss it is less than we might have expected from Mr. Haughey, who still seems determined to keep his options open.

John Hume, by contrast, commented helpfully. Following his call on Mr. Atkins, he made a statement (also appended) appealing to the hunger strikers to call off their protest, and to their relatives and supporters to take up the opportunity given by the Government's statement to resolve the problem satisfactorily.

He then discussed with officials how the step-by-step approach might be implemented, beginning with a restoration of privileges regarding visits, letters and parcels and later association. Relatives could then be encouraged to send in parcels of clothing so that prisoners could wear their own clothes for substantial periods. Later, prisoners would be seen individually by education and training officers to discuss their particular educational and vocational needs. Following a period of good behaviour, remission could be restored, again on an individual basis, but subject to the Secretary of State's control. Mr. Hume felt that the scope for movement within the rules and privileges which had been outlined could end the protests.

Mr. Hume telephoned the Northern Ireland Office today and reported that both our statement and his own had been well received by the Catholic community in Northern Ireland. The influential parent of

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one of the hunger strikers had contacted him and would be seeing him on Sunday evening. He too was disappointed with the reaction from the Taoiseach and said he would do what he could over the weekend to persuade Dublin to be more helpful. He undertook to keep in touch and remained optimistic about developments.

We have had some indication of the attitude of the two prison chaplains who were commended to us by the Vatican, Fathers Toner and Murphy. They said this morning that they expected the statement to have little influence with the hunger strikers, considering that they had rejected Cardinal O'Fiaich's appeal to them out of hand. However, the Priests then said that they would each be visiting the hunger strikers over the weekend, (one today, one tomorrow and both on Sunday), would show them the statement, and seek a response as the message sunk in. We expect a report back from them on Sunday evening, so that if there is anything significant the Prime Minister can be told before her meeting with Mr. Haughey.

The statement was given major treatment by the British and Irish news media last night and this morning. The point was well taken by most of them, that while the Government remained firm on the issue of political status, it continued willing to consider humanitarian aspects. Several commentators, noting the emphasis on that point by John Hume and the Irish Government, have concluded that there is scope for a way out of the deadlock. But warnings from Unionist spokesmen (Paisley, Brookeborough, etc.) about the consequences of the Government going soft are starting to emerge. There are obviously more reactions to come. The media are seeking comments from such people as Cardinal O'Fiaich and Bishop Daly, who refused to pronounce overnight. Analysis of the statement by the foreign press continues, and there has not yet been much significant comment from interested parties in the United States or Western Europe.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Paul Lever in the FCO and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours sincerely
Mike Stephens

M.W. HOPKINS

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Statement by Mr John Hume. Leader of the SDLP following a meeting with the Secretary of State, Mr Atkins.

my deep I met the Secretary of State, Mr Humphrey Atkins, today to express concern at the situation that obtains in Northern Ireland today arising out of the protest in the Maze prison. This is an issue in which there are deep and divided feelings throughout the whole community and which, if not resolved, threatens to create a level of sectarian confrontation and violence which we have not seen for many years. I believe that all people of good will in Northern Ireland wish to see a satisfactory solution of this issue. I reiterated to the Secretary of State the SDLP's position that the only punishment to which prisoners should be subjected is the deprivation of liberty. All other punishments threaten humanitarian standards in prisons. This position is completely in accord with the recent judgment of the European Commission for Human Rights. Because of the deep and divided emotions involved in this issue it is difficult for anyone in Northern Ireland to have an objective or impartial view of it. I accept, however, that the European Commission for Human Rights is both an impartial and objective body which is seen to be so by most people, not alone in Northern Ireland, but internationally as well and I accept their judgment on this issue. I have asked the Secretary of State to pursue a resolution of the problem in the context of that judgment and I believe that in that context it is possible to achieve a step-by-step deescalation of the problem which will be satisfactory to everyone involved.

The Europaen Commission for Human Rights state that there is no basis in national or international law or in the European Convention of Human Rights for the claim to political status but also state that the Government in dealing with the issue was more concerned with punishment than with seeking a way out of the impasse. I, therefore, welcome the Secretary of State's indication to me today that the Government is not immovable in this regard and is ready, despite the protest, to deal with humanitarian conditions in the prison and to discuss these matters with anyone in Northern Ireland who is concerned about it in order to find a way out of the impasse.

I welcome this as an important first step in a process that could lead to a satisfactory solution of the problem and I appeal to those prisoners on hunger strike to recognise it as such and to call off their protest in order to allow an examination of the problems to take place in an atmosphere devoid of tension.

I appeal in particular to all those active in support of the prisoners to support my call and I ask the relatives who are the people most deeply concerned to recognise this opportunity for a satisfactory resolution to the problem and to use all their influence to help to bring it about. I repeat again my offer that my own good offices are available if requested to progress the matter further.