

HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL TOMAS OFIAICH,
ARCHBISHOP OF ARMAGH AND PRIMATE OF ALL IRELAND,
ARA COELI, ARMAGH, N. IRELAND.

*Despatched
by Tel via
Sutcliffe
28/4/81*

Ireland

Thank you for the telegram which you sent me yesterday about the Maze hunger strike.

Like all people who care for human life I hope very much that even at this late stage the hunger strikers will pay heed to your appeal.

I recognise that in sending me your message you are seeking to save life and not the granting of political status. I am also aware of those characteristics of the NI prison population to which you refer: and of the proposals on prison dress and work that you and Bishop Daly put forward last year. The fact remains that the hunger strike is in support of a demand for political status: the concessions which the hunger strikers are seeking on dress and work are in pursuit of that demand. The Government made its position absolutely clear on the questions of political status and the so-called five demands before the first hunger strike began last October. We are determined to stand firm on that position. To do otherwise would be to abandon sound principles in the face of the threat of violence.

You also urge me to send an NIO representative to talk to prisoners. This was done last December in order that the hunger strikers should be in no doubt about what the prison regime afforded. I do not believe that there can now be any doubt about this, given the extensive efforts that have been made to publish the facts. I am afraid I therefore see no useful purpose that could be served in a visit of the kind you propose.

/Could I say

Could I say finally, that, while determined to stand firm on the issue of political status and what goes with it, the Government will also maintain and, as practicable, improve the high standards already achieved in the NI prison regime. I do not believe that changes in work and clothing are justified on humanitarian grounds, given the adoption of civilian-type dress last October and the wide range of work already available. But the Government will continue to take account of the views of responsible people and bodies who have humanitarian considerations genuinely at heart. I believe that by its actions last year and in the course of the two hunger strikes it has shown its willingness to do this.