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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
GREAT GEORGE STREET,
LONDON SW1P 3AJ

4 May, 1981

Michael Alexander, Esq.,
No. 10 Downing St.,
LONDON SW1

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Dear Michael,

FUNERAL OF ROBERT SANDS

We expect Robert Sands to die later today, in which case his hunger strike would have lasted 64 days. The purpose of this letter is to set out the approach which we are adopting over the funeral arrangements.

The practice in Northern Ireland is for funerals to take place soon after the death, in this case probably on Wednesday or Thursday if he dies today. We have made special - and secure - arrangements for the autopsy to be carried out under the Coroner's direction with the minimum of delay, so that the body can be returned to the family as quickly as possible. Thereafter the arrangements are for the family to decide. We expect that the body will go to lie overnight in a church, with services in the evening and the following morning. In the afternoon the funeral procession would take place, with the burial in the Republican plot at Milltown Cemetery in West Belfast, the traditional place for such burials.

We have some reason to believe that the Church will do what it can to avoid the church service being exploited by the Provisionals: and possibly also to ensure that the funeral service is at a church sited to minimise the risks of sectarian confrontation during the procession. The process itself will attract thousands - probably tens of thousands - of people from Northern Ireland, the Republic, and elsewhere. The Provisionals will do all they can to attract as much publicity as possible, and the international press which is in Belfast in force, will respond. The proceedings will include, no doubt, the display of tricolours and the making of inflammatory speeches. Sands is reported to have asked for (and the Provisionals will anyway ensure that he gets) a full "military" funeral with masked men and fusillades of shots, uniformed men in marching order and so on.

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All of this will be deeply offensive to most people in the United Kingdom, and will undoubtedly make for damaging publicity abroad. It may be less offensive to the majority in Northern Ireland than might at first be supposed. There is a tradition that the communities should be allowed to bury their dead as they wish, and the Protestant leaders are unlikely to foment trouble at the funeral though no doubt some of them will complain loudly that HMG should have stopped the display.

My Secretary of State is well aware of public reaction, particularly in Great Britain, to the sort of display we are likely to see. The task of intervening in such a funeral, and of preventing the many illegalities (of a non-violent nature) likely to be committed in the course of it, would fall upon the RUC and the Army. He has discussed the operational implications with the Chief Constable and the GOC. Their judgment is that the security forces must not react to the funeral in a way which would worsen the security situation at a moment when sectarian sensitivities are most acute. They believe that Protestant interference with the funeral (which is relatively unlikely) must if necessary be prevented. The police may need to impose a minor route diversion to avoid a Protestant area. But they would not intervene during the funeral to prevent offences of a non-violent nature or to make arrests. Any intervention by the security forces to deal with propaganda or illegal symbolism (including the firing of volleys at the graveside) would be difficult and very dangerous, given the size of the crowds. Such attempts would almost certainly have to be in such strength as to provoke violence which could easily get out of control in such circumstances, with immediate riots and the danger of intervention by Protestant extremists. The usual steps will be taken, however, to obtain photographic and other evidence for subsequent prosecution.

The Secretary of State has no doubt that the operational judgment of the security force commanders must be supported in this matter, and he has agreed that they should proceed accordingly. He wants the Prime Minister to be aware of the position not merely because this judgment will be widely and vociferously criticised but also because that criticism will make it all the more important for the Government as a whole to be seen to support the security forces at a time when any impression of lack of confidence could threaten a dangerous destabilisation of the security situation.

I am sending copies of this letter to the Private Secretaries to the Lord Chancellor, the Home Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Defence Secretary, the Leader of the House and Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours sincerely
Mike Hopkins
M.W. HOPKINS

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