



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

13 November 1980

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Your Holiness,

Thank you for your personal message about the hunger strike at the Maze prison in Northern Ireland. The British Government fully share your concern that the hunger strike, and the wider protest at the Maze prison, be brought to an end as soon as possible.

Of the seven hunger strikers, six are members of the Provisional IRA; one is a member of the Irish National Liberation Army. All were convicted in open court of very serious crimes, including murder, attempted murder, armed robbery and explosives offences. Their hunger strike is in pursuit of a demand for a political status which would involve their receiving privileges greater than those available to other convicted criminals in Northern Ireland. I have made it clear that the British Government cannot and will not accede to this demand. To do so would be to accept that political motivation in some way excuses such serious crimes; it would encourage the use of violence as a means of obtaining political objectives; and it would be likely to provoke a violent confrontation between the two communities in the North.

Nevertheless, my colleagues and I are fully aware of the increase in tension which may be created both by the hunger strike itself and by the ruthless exploitation of it for propaganda purposes. We shall be quick to grasp any practical

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opportunity to ease the situation. Over the past few months we have made a number of changes in prison rules; these could have led to a significant improvement in the appalling conditions in which the protesting prisoners choose to live. But they have not taken advantage of these changes. Recently we announced our intention to abolish conventional prison uniform for all prisoners in Northern Ireland and to substitute a range of ordinary civilian clothing provided by the prison authorities. Since one of the features of prison life to which the protesting prisoners say that they most object is the obligation to wear prison uniform, the decision is an indication of the Government's willingness to approach this difficult problem with flexibility and fairness and in a genuinely humanitarian spirit. But it too has been dismissed out of hand.

You may be sure that we very much welcome the efforts of the clergy in Northern Ireland to persuade the prisoners both to give up the strike and to end their protest; and I hope you will be able to give your full support to this objective.

Should you wish, I shall of course be happy to discuss this problem with you during my visit to Rome later in the month.

Yours sincerely,  
Rangoni Indeter

His Holiness Pope John Paul II