

EPS 380
UNCLASSIFIED

FM WASHINGTON 282220Z APR 81

TO PRIORITY FCO

TELEGRAM NO 1319 OF 28 APRIL

INFO PRIORITY NIO LONDON, NIO BELFAST, DUBLIN, BIRMGHAM, NEW YORK, PS TO THE PM.
NO 10, DOWNING STREET.

NORTHERN IRELAND: U.S. MEDIA COVERAGE OF HUNGER STRIKE *mb*

1. IN CONTRAST WITH THE INTEREST SHOWN BY THE US MEDIA DURING THE 1980 HUNGER STRIKE THERE WAS VIRTUALLY NO REPORTING OR EDITORIAL COMMENT ON THE SANDS HUNGER STRIKE UNTIL THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF HIS CANDIDATURE FOR PARLIAMENT. INSTEAD COMMENT, ALMOST ENTIRELY FAVOURABLE, CONCENTRATED ON THE PRIME MINISTER'S INITIATIVE FOR JOINT STUDIES WITH THE IRISH GOVERNMENT AND THE FORMATION OF THE NEW FRIENDS OF IRELAND GROUP IN CONGRESS.

2. IN THE LAST TWO TO THREE WEEKS, THIS HAS CHANGED ENTIRELY. COVERAGE HAS INCREASED RAPIDLY FROM A LOW LEVEL (MRS MCALISKEY'S VISIT FROM 13 TO 14 APRIL PRODUCED LITTLE PUBLICITY) TO A POSITION IN WHICH MOST MAJOR NEWSPAPERS, THE TV AND RADIO NETWORKS AND LOCAL NEWS PROGRAMMES ARE CARRYING ACCOUNTS OF LATEST DEVELOPMENTS EACH DAY, FOCUSING ESPECIALLY ON VIOLENCE IN STREET DEMONSTRATIONS BECAUSE OF THEIR VISUAL IMPACT.

3. THE H-BLOCKS PROTEST AND THE ISSUES BEHIND IT HAVE NOT BEEN EXAMINED IN DEPTH, PARTLY BECAUSE IRA PROPAGANDA HAS CONCENTRATED DURING THIS HUNGER STRIKE ON THE QUESTION OF POLITICAL STATUS RATHER THAN THE 5 SPECIFIC DEMANDS FOR CHANGES IN THE PRISON REGIME: PARTLY ALSO PERHAPS BECAUSE THE END OF THE DIRTY PROTEST REDUCED THE PLAUSIBILITY HERE OF CLAIMS THAT HMG WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR INFLICTING INTOLERABLE PRISON CONDITIONS. THE ELECTION OF SANDS WAS CARRIED WIDELY BUT WAS REGARDED MORE AS A CURIOSITY RATHER THAN AN EVENT OF MAJOR SIGNIFICANCE. AS THE NEW YORK TIMES PUT IT IN AN EDITORIAL ON 22 APRIL, QUOTE IT WAS BOBBIE SANDS' PLIGHT, NOT HIS POLITICS, THAT BECAME THE CENTRAL ISSUE UNQUOTE.

4. AMONG EDITORIALS IN THE LAST TWO WEEKS THE ONLY SERIOUSLY JARRING NOTE WAS STRUCK BY THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE (15 APRIL) WHICH CRITICISED THE PRIME MINISTER AND ALLEGED COMPLACENCY. REPORTING OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS HAS GENERALLY BEEN FACTUAL, WITH A TENDENCY TO DRAMATISE THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN THE ARMY AND DEMONSTRATORS AND TO EMPHASISE THE RISK OF OPEN CIVIL WAR IF SANDS DIES. EDITORIAL COMMENT GENERALLY, WHILE OFFERING CRITICISM OF ALLEGED INFLEXIBILITY IN PRISON ADMINISTRATION, HAS SO FAR FULLY BACKED THE DECISION NOT TO ACCORD POLITICAL STATUS.

HENDERSON

NORTHERN IRELAND LIMITED
RID PS/MR HURD
NAD PS/MR RIDLEY
INFORMATION D PS/MR BLAKER
WED PS/PUS
MAED SIR A ACLAND
NEWS D CHIEF CLERK
SECURITY D MR ADAMS
PUSD MR BULLARD
PS MR FERGUSSON
PS/LPS LORD N G LENNOX
MR BRAITHEWAITE

ADDITIONAL DISTN.
NORTHERN IRELAND

THIS TELEGRAM
WAS NOT
ADVANCED