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10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

27 July 1981

Dear Senator Kennedy

Thank you for the message which you and other members of both Houses of Congress sent me on 16 July about the hunger strikes in Northern Ireland.

I fully share your deep concern about the deaths of the hunger strikers. Since I wrote to you, Speaker O'Neill, Senator Moynihan and Governor Carey on 14 May, Her Majesty's Government has continued to give urgent attention to this question. I am surprised you should feel that there is a lack of commitment by the Government to reach the earliest possible settlement of the strike. We have facilitated the efforts of the Pope's personal representative, the European Commission of Human Rights, the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, and now the International Committee of the Red Cross. All have foundered on the intransigent adherence of the prisoners to the five demands which they formulated five years ago and which have not changed in substance to this day. The responsibility for additional deaths rests firmly on the shoulders of those who are ordering these young men to commit suicide in the cause of subverting democratic institutions in Ireland North and South.

You asked me to send a representative into the Maze Prison to talk with the prisoners on the basis of a statement of 4 July alleged to have been made on their behalf. Repeated efforts have been made to explain directly to the hunger strikers, that is to those who are

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being ordered to die, what will happen when the protest ends. The latest attempt to talk to the prisoners was made in the early morning of 21 July. The hunger strikers have refused to listen on the orders of the prisoner they regard as in charge of them - a man who made clear to the Governor on 19 July that he was prepared only to engage in negotiation on the basis of the prisoners' demands and not to listen to any exposition of the Government's position. I imagine you are by now well aware from our many statements what the regime is which the protesters would enjoy if they ceased their protest. If not, H.M. Ambassador would be glad to explain the regime to you; it is a regime which, in terms of humane treatment of prisoners, stands comparison with any in the world. You will no doubt have seen that a spokesman for the Prime Minister of the Irish Republic said Dr. FitzGerald believed that the British Government had met his suggestion that an official speak to the hunger strikers, that he deeply regretted the hunger strikers had rejected the offer from officials to clarify what conditions would apply if the strike ended, and that in his view responsibility for finding a solution now rested with the prisoners.

I have thought very carefully about the hunger strikes in Northern Ireland in recent months and have in particular taken account of your representations and those of others at home and abroad who, like the Government, want to see the hunger strikes brought to an end as quickly as possible. I am convinced that we have acted honourably throughout, and that we have shown great flexibility while adhering to principles which no responsible Government could abandon. We have made clear our commitment to the further improvement of the regime, even though the standards in Northern Ireland prisons are

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already high. So far this has evoked no constructive response from the protesting prisoners. I continue to hope that the hunger strikers and those who direct them will recognise that we shall stand by that commitment when the hunger strike ends, but that to continue their action will bring only further suffering to themselves, their families and the whole community in Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely

Raymond Hetherington

Senator Edward Kennedy.