

13 April 1984

Northern Ireland Prisons

The Prime Minister has noted the contents  
of your Secretary of State's minute of 10 April.

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Prime Minister.

You will wish to note in particular  
Mr. Poir's intention to introduce a  
new controlled régime at the  
Maze.

Prime Minister

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NORTHERN IRELAND PRISONS

When we met on 16 March I told you of my concern about the situation in the Maze Prison following my discussions with the Governor. As I said then, I had asked that further inquiries should be made and this minute is to report on the current situation at the Maze and in Northern Ireland prisons generally.

Control of the Maze

The Governor of the Maze was particularly concerned that some prison officers were so intimidated by fear of attack outside the prison that they were turning a blind eye to some of the rules and regulations and opting for a quiet life. He called this collusion, but he did not intend to imply that prisoners and prison officers were actually conspiring together. The intimidation of prison officers has recently been accentuated by such actions as the murder of an Assistant Governor by the PIRA and the placing of petrol bombs under prison officers' cars attributed to the UVF. But we cannot afford any repetition of the slackness in carrying out Prison Rules which was the primary cause of last year's escape, and I am now taking steps to ensure the stricter supervision of prison officers by management. This will require some increase in numbers of Governor grades, and the secondment of a number of such officers from the English and Scottish Prison Services is already being pursued. They will be difficult to recruit.

Another and more difficult problem facing the Governor which may also require additional staff, is the development of de facto segregation of prisoners, which is taking on some of the features of special category status. Earlier protest action by both Republican and Loyalist factions has now resulted in the Maze prison

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being effectively divided into 3 parts - a Loyalist area, a Republican area and a mixed area. In order to seek to increase the mixed area the Governor, with my approval, moved two small groups of Republicans and Loyalists together. The result was immediate violence from the Loyalist side. The Governor has concluded from this and from other intelligence in the prison that both Republican and Loyalist prisoners are now determined not to mix and to create conditions of violent conflict if the Prison Authorities move them together against their wishes. Inaction in the face of this situation will result in a drift to the acceptance of segregation and we should find that we had taken an important step down the road back to special category status. After all the struggles which have taken place - including the hunger strikes of 1981 - I do not believe that we can allow this to happen.

The way forward which the Governor has proposed, and which the Prison Department and other Governors support, is to introduce a controlled regime for both groups of separated prisoners, leaving those prisoners in mixed accommodation with the full benefits of the existing regime. The main feature of this controlled regime would be a strict limitation on the number of prisoners allowed out of their cells together, particularly at association work and exercise. As a result, association time would be reduced by half. Prisoners would be required to work, thus marking another distinction from special category status.

The introduction of a new controlled regime at the Maze would carry considerable risks. It seems likely that there will be some adverse reaction from prisoners and we cannot rule out the possibility of violence against prison officers and of protests and intimidation by sympathisers outside the prison. In spite of the risks, I believe that action is needed to avoid slipping back into special category status. I believe such a new regime could be justified as a necessary arrangement for the oversight and control of those prisoners who, to quote Sir James Hennessy's report, are "dangerous prisoners who acted in cohesive groups". There is also the important point that our experience has shown that when prisoners are segregated the risk of violence to staff as well as the planning of escapes is





greater than if they were integrated. The controlled regime would help counter this.

The Governor has suggested that the introduction of such a new regime at the Maze might involve the addition of as many as 250 officers together with a small number of additional Assistant Governors. My officials are examining the precise requirement, the way in which it might be met and the resource implications; but I am sure that we must move forward on this front and give it a high priority.

#### Protection of Prison Staff

While it is not possible to guarantee full protection to prison staff living in the local community in Northern Ireland I am satisfied that all reasonable measures are being taken. Where any officer is identified as under specific threat immediate additional protection measures are taken. Special assistance is being provided to enable the Governor of HM Prison, Armagh, to move to a house in a safer area. In the meantime he is living in quarters in the Maze prison and only returns to his home irregularly.

#### Possible Hunger Strike

I am glad to be able to report that the risk of a hunger strike by INLA prisoners in Belfast prison has now significantly receded. The prisoners have issued a statement calling off their hunger strike. The underlying concerns of the prisoners about supergrass evidence however remains and some alternative form of protest action may well be taken. We shall continue to keep the situation under review.

#### Hennessey Report

I have been taking a close personal interest in the implementation of this report and I am glad to be able to tell you that substantial progress has been made. Thirty three of the 73 recommendations have already been fully implemented and urgent work is continuing on the remainder. The action taken to date has significantly upgraded the security of the Maze prison.



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Conclusion

The potential for trouble in Northern Ireland prisons remains, with the attendant risk of serious repercussions for the security and political situation in the Province as a whole. I am satisfied we are doing all we can at present to head off these difficulties, but further action of the sort I have outlined must be taken at the Maze if we are to maintain control. This is likely to have resource implications which will need to be carefully quantified, but which I hope will not of itself prevent the urgent action which I believe we must take. I shall keep you informed of how this progresses.

JP

10 April 1984

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