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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

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NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

WHITEHALL

LONDON SW1A 2AZ

John Coles Esq  
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LONDON  
SW1

2 March 1984

*Handwritten initials*

Prime Minister.

*A.C. 3/3*

Dear John

POSSIBLE HUNGER STRIKE IN BELFAST PRISON

You asked for a report on the possibility that there will be a hunger strike in Belfast prison.

There have been a number of public references to the possibility of a hunger strike, the first of which came out at the end of January. Information from secret sources makes it clear that definite plans for a hunger strike are being made by remand prisoners in Belfast prison associated with INLA. The purpose would be to protest against the use of converted terrorists, and in particular to bring pressure to bear on Harry Kirkpatrick, on whose evidence those concerned have been charged. The present threat seems to be a serious one, although a similar plan in August last year was not put into effect.

Full details are not clear, although it appears the three prisoners would aim to start their fasts between the early part of this month and Easter. Experience has now shown that a hunger strike reaches a critical condition after between 50 and 60 days; people can go very near the brink indeed without suffering permanent damage to their health. The effect of this would be to bring things to a climax in the period leading up to the European elections and covering the time when President Reagan will be in Europe for the World Economic Summit and will be visiting the Republic.

Our information suggests that the prisoners have little support outside the prison, either in a popular sense or from some leaders of INLA/IRSP. Despite their common opposition to the use of converted terrorists the initial reaction of the PIRA has also been to discourage the hunger strike. In these circumstances it is difficult to judge how matters will develop or to be certain what would be the reaction of the organisations if the prisoners embarked on a serious fast. Sinn Fein, although it may want attention attracted from its campaign for the European election, might feel obliged to offer support if events

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forced the pace. The prisoners might hope that they could achieve their aim of forcing Kirkpatrick to retract without having to undertake a prolonged or fatal fast. Despite the significant uncertainties our assessment at the moment is that it is unlikely anything resembling the 1980/81 hunger strikes is in prospect. We are however monitoring the situation closely, and will keep you informed.

*Yours ever*

*Dave*

D A HILL

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10 DOWNING STREET

*From the Private Secretary*

5 March 1984

POSSIBLE HUNGER STRIKE IN  
BELFAST PRISON

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The Prime Minister has noted  
the contents of your letter of 2 March.

A. J. COLES

Derek Hill, Esq.,  
Northern Ireland Office.

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