

THE
STRIPPING NAKED
OF THE
WOMEN PRISONERS
IN
ARMAGH PRISON

1982 - 83

By Fr Denis Faul

EASTER 1983

THE STRIPPING NAKED OF THE WOMEN PRISONERS IN ARMAGH PRISON

N. IRELAND

Following an incident on 22 October 1982, concerning a girl prisoner, non-political, on remand in Armagh Jail - she is now in the Young Offenders' Centre there - all the women prisoners entering or leaving prison were stripped naked and visually examined. This has led to protest and criticism from the prisoners, their families, and the Catholic clergy and hierarchy.

Official complaints were made to the Governor of the prison and the Board of Visitors. An official of the Northern Ireland Office said that it was a matter of reactivating a search procedure that was once in vogue in Armagh Prison that it was not a once and for all measure following the October incident of the non-political prisoner, and that it would continue following the decision of the 'Director of Operations'.

The chaplain at Armagh Prison, Fr Raymond Murray, because it was matter of conscience and of a grave moral nature reported to his religious superior, Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich, and the two bishops who have diocesan prisoners there, Most Rev. Cahal Daly, Bishop of Down and Connor, and Most Rev. Edward Daly, Bishop of Derry. A report was also sent to His Excellency the Papal Nuncio, Dublin.

The text of Fr Murray's letter to the Armagh Senate of Priests, dated 14 December 1982, was as follows:-

Since 9 November 1982 a serious decline in standards of behaviour has taken place on the side of the authorities in the N. Ireland Office prison affairs management. Girls entering or leaving the women's prison, Armagh, for whatever reason, admission to prison, going to and on return from remand court or for trial, visiting hospital, parole, inter-jail visits, have to undergo a completely naked visual examination of all parts of their body front and back while the prisoner stands totally naked before prison female warders. This type of degrading inhuman treatment has not been used during the fifteen years of my chaplaincy there nor in the seventeen years of my predecessor, Very Reverend James Clarke P.P. This new procedure has been a traumatic experience for young Catholic girls and older women, married and

single, all of whom were reared and educated in Catholic houses and schools where the strictest standards of modesty were impressed upon them as a matter of conscience. This has now gone on for six weeks.

I give you an example - Geraldine Crawford, a young Catholic woman from the diocese of Down and Connor was visually examined in this degrading way 13 times between the dates 20 and 30 November. The girls are made to turn around to be examined totally naked front and back.

I and my fellow priests consider this inhuman and degrading treatment contrary to Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights. As a priest I consider it to be contrary to the Sixth and Ninth commandments, a serious invasion of a woman's privacy and treating of the person as an object.

No valid reason for this continuing disgraceful procedure has been brought forward by the Secretary of State, Mr James Prior, or the Minister responsible for prisons in the North of Ireland, Lord Gowrie.

I want you to use your valuable influence to have this inhuman practice discontinued immediately.

Cardinals and bishops in Ireland and abroad, various Commissions for Justice and Peace throughout the Catholic world, congressmen and senators of the House of Representatives, U.S.A., conferences and unions of priests at home and on the missions, Teachtaí Dála, Members of Parliament, London, members of the House of Lords, London national and international human rights' groups, women's organisations, medical associations, were alerted as to the crisis and the intense suffering of the women who were being strip searched.

Prisoners' Statement

On 15 November the political women prisoners in Armagh Jail issued this statement:-

On Tuesday 9 November remand prisoners due to appear in court were taken individually to the reception area in the prison. There, in the presence of eleven screws, each woman was told to strip completely of all clothing - a refusal to do so, it was

stated, would result in forcible measures being taken. A number of women who were menstruating requested that they be allowed to wear their undergarments - this was totally unacceptable and eventually there was no alternative but to remove all clothing. When all clothing was removed each garment was separately searched and each woman was then exposed to a thorough 'visual' body search. Having first viewed her frontal area she was then forced to turn around in order that the anal area be scrutinised.

It is an immoral and humiliating procedure to impose upon any woman. The prison administration have stated that all prisoners will be subjected to such searches in the future and assures that any prisoner who fails to comply to the regulations will be forcibly stripped and searched.

"Help The Prisoners"

On 24 November the "Help the Prisoners" Committee issued the following statement:-

The 'Help the Prisoners' Committee has noted with grave concern the following allegations made by relatives, solicitors, and prisoners - The remand prisoners in Armagh Prison have for the third week in succession been stripped totally naked, coming and going to the local court in Armagh on Tuesdays, visually examined front and back in a most degrading fashion while their clothing has been held up to ridicule and taunting remarks.

This cruel course of action arose because of the negligence of an officer of the crown some weeks ago.

How would Mr Prior and Lord Gowrie like their wives, daughters and sisters to be treated in such a fashion?

We appeal to the religious superiors and sisters to write to Mrs Thatcher and other political leaders about this degradation of Irish Catholic womanhood.

The 'Help the Prisoners' Committee, and, it would seem, the prisoners also, and other concerned people waited quietly and patiently until 1st January to allow the administration in the Northern Ireland Office to fade out this obscene practice following the sound advice given to them.

The N. Ireland Office took the respite as meaning that they could persist. that in their words 'the majority of prisoners accepted it without complaint or apparent embarrassment!'

Allegations of Assaults

On 11 June 1983 Mr Owen Carron MP referred in the newspapers to allegations of assaults during the strip searches. He referred in the **Irish News** to allegations of incidents in Armagh prison on 4 January when three prisoners were said to have been physically assaulted by seven warders. The MP said that all three women had been thrown to the ground, had their legs and arms twisted, and had been sat on by warders. They then had all their clothing dragged off them and one of them, who had her period, had her sanitary towel removed. Mr Carron said that two women had received severe bruising to the rib cage, arms and back, and a third had to have her ankle strapped because of considerable bruising to the joint.

A Prisoner's Experience

On 27 January an ex-remand prisoner related her personal experience regarding strip searching:-

When I was brought from Townhall Street RUC Barracks to Armagh, I was taken into the reception area where a warder directed me to a cubicle. It was about three feet wide and five feet long. There is only a half-partitioned door and there's a small bench at the back. She told me to strip and put a sheet around me. When I did this she squeezed in and told me to open the front of the sheet, then the back. She was apologetic, excusing my treatment as being part of everyday routine. There is no need for this inspection, because as you go to the hospital wing you are given the same inspection. So really the first strip-search in reception is just a form of humiliating you from the beginning and letting you know where you, and they, stand.

In the time I was there I was strip-searched about nine times going to court. After the first search when I went into Armagh, I still wasn't fully aware of what was happening. The first time I went down, before going to court, there were around nine warders hanging about and I had no illusions. They told me to strip and hand out my clothes for inspection. When they got them, they made snide remarks about their shape or the style, just to get you to react. The door was left open and I was left naked in full view of all nine of them.

Personally I was really embarrassed. Even from my childhood in school, with friends or even teachers, I was modest. Going to the doctor, you still try and hide yourself, but here I was standing in front of complete strangers naked.

First of all I felt humiliated by it. Then she told me to turn round and I was aware I was being stared at. My embarrassment turned to real anger at the way I was being treated. It's the same for the other women. But we came to realise that it isn't us who are being humiliated. It's the warders.

Allegations of Injuries

Assemblyman Danny Morrison and Mr Owen Carron MP made further allegations of injuries to the remand prisoners during strip searches on 8 February. Mr Morrison said in the *Irish News* of 11 February that Catherine Moore was forcibly stripped, thrown to the ground, punched and kicked when she returned from a remand court hearing in Armagh. He claimed that when the prisoner went back to her cell another woman, Philomena Lyttle, demanded to see the Governor - "I have been told that he appeared with a large number of male and female warders and was personally involved in forcing Philomena Lyttle back into her cell."

The 'Barbie' of Armagh

On 18 February *The Catholic Herald* carried the following article by Fr Denis Faul, one of their regular contributors:-

Fr Denis Faul describes an offensive procedure by the Northern Ireland Office.

THE 'BARBIE' OF ARMAGH

The Media in Northern Ireland have splurged attention on several groups of "Bible" converts in the prisons in Northern Ireland.

While these are mainly on the Protestant side, there have been some Catholics who declared that they had abandoned Catholicism to become "Christians", meaning Bible reading Christians; and there are others who go to Bible classes and no longer go to Mass.

A wary scepticism invades the public mind when they read of these "conversions", wary among the Ruling class who think it is a trick to get out of jail; and a weary sigh from the oppressed Catholics who never hear of any General, Constable or politicians being converted, reading the Bible and giving public expressions to his repentances.

The arrest of Barbie, the Nazi torturer and his return to Lyon caused interesting reactions, the pot calling the kettle black in many countries.

Barbie was an agent of the State, the State being a particularly bad one; his comrades pleaded in 1945-47 that they were carrying out the orders of the government in torturing and exterminating but they were accused of crimes against humanity; the French government and army whose resistance heroes had suffered at the hands of Barbie, proceeded to Algeria in the fifties and, so it is said, did similar barbarous things on thousands of poor Arabs struggling for independence.

Where does all this history leave Christian conversion? Are the Churches simply instruments in the hands of the ruling classes to keep the serfs quiet and obtain co-operation in return from the rulers?

Have all the Prophets died or been gagged or promoted out of harm's way? All morality does come back to Paddy Murphy's broken arm and Biddy Murphy's broken leg, whether it was broken by the IRA, the UVF, the British Army or the RUC. If one cannot do something effectively in word or deed about it, then one should not pronounce on morality at all.

No one is better than the fairminded Englishman - that is my experience - this nine hundred years of freedom means that he does not fear his own government. That is why I want to appeal to him on behalf of the young girls, fifty of them, in Armagh prison.

A mistake by an RUC man at the remand court in November meant that a bunch of keys came into the possession of a young and non-political prisoner; she took them back from Armagh courthouse to the jail.

These keys were quickly recovered by a search and then to cover up the mistake it was decreed by the Northern Ireland Office that every girl entering or leaving the prison for any purpose should be stripped naked and inspected by several prison officers, who were not nurses.

One girl was searched nineteen times in this way in eleven days as her court case was at hearing, although she spent the day in the court surrounded by RUC men and was locked en route in a steel compartment in a prison van.

A sweet little girl from Derry on the Foyle found two weeks ago that several female members of the visitors' committee had arrived and wanted to inspect the inspection.

The little girl said: "There's enough of you looking at me" and refused. She was set upon by heavy wardresses, knocked to the floor, her clothes were ripped off; she was quite badly bruised; the same happened on her way back from the remand court and she was charged with obstructing and assaulting officers and locked in solitary.

This offensive procedure never took place in Armagh since 1950 - until now that is as far as our clerical memory goes. There is no need for it; it is cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. It is Barbie in Armagh, but the Catholic girls of Ireland are not going to be treated like the Jews in Germany.

I recall my mother saying to me: "If everyone had protested when the first Jew was humiliated in the streets of Munich in 1933, there would never have been a holocaust."

These little girls in Armagh have not been converted into little British citizens: that is not likely to happen. They have not any titles or decorations; they were taught to be pure and chaste like the Blessed Virgin and St Brigid and St Maria Goretti. That purity is being defiled in the city of St. Patrick.

On 19 February twenty women symbolically staged a protest in Derry about the treatment of the women in Armagh Jail.

House of Commons' Questions

In early March the **Irish News**, the **Belfast Telegraph**, the **News Letter**, the **Guardian**, and the **Daily Mirror** amongst others carried the formal letter of Fr Raymond Murray, Chaplain, Armagh Prison, complaining about the immorality of the strip searching and its violation of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Mr Kevin McNamara tabled written questions in the House of Commons. In reply Mr Prior said that the search procedures were introduced in November 1982, that up to 1 March 97 prisoners had been searched on a total of 772 occasions. Asked by Mr McNamara MP if they were subject to strip searches during their menstrual periods and whether any have refused such a search during that time Mr Prior replied:-

"Yes; but when a prisoner says that she is menstruating a woman hospital officer is called and is present at the search. One prisoner has refused to co-operate with the search on this ground."

Note:-

There are no women hospital officers present at the strip-searches when the women are menstruating. On the occasion he mentions, the girl was sick. She asked for one of the trained nurses from the prison hospital. She was told none were available. After a long delay a 'hospital officer', not a nurse was sent down. Because the nurse had not been sent the girl refused to co-operate. She was then forced to the ground by five officers and forcibly stripped. She had already stripped to her underpants herself. On her return from court she and another girl who refused to co-operate were forced to the ground by a group of officers and forcibly stripped. On all other occasions when girls are menstruating and undergo strip searches there are no nurses or 'medical officers' present.

Mr Prior admitted he had already received thirty letters about the strip searching, five of them from N. Ireland and fourteen from the Republic of Ireland, and in addition about ninety stereotyped letters from the USA.

In answer to a question on solitary confinement Mr Prior said that since 1 March 1982 there were fifty-one serious offences against prison rules by twenty-two women prisoners in Armagh which led to awards of cellular confinement as a punishment. Seven of these awards were made by the Board of Visitors, and the remainder by the Governor.

The number of occasions on which the prisoners concerned were awarded cellular confinement was as follows:-

Occasions cellular confinement awarded

Number of Prisoners	Number
10	1
8	2
1	3
1	5
1	7
1	10

Note:-

The question must be asked - why the escalation in cellular confinements since 1 March 1982? What has been classified as serious offences?

What about the huge number of evening lock-ups not classed as cellular confinement?

Mr McNamara asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on how many occasions prison visitors were present at the strip searches of prisoners in Armagh prison; whether the prisoners had the right to refuse to be strip searched before prison visitors; whether any objected to the presence of prison visitors when being strip searched; and with what results.

Mr Prior: On one occasion two women members of the board of visitors, who under prison rules have access to all parts of the prison, asked three prisoners if they would agree to the members watching the search procedure so that they could report to the full board. I understand that none of the prisoners objected but that, if they had done so, the board members would have respected their wishes.

Note:-

On a number of occasions female members of the Board of Visitors have expressed their abhorrence of the strip-searching to the prisoners when on visitation. They have told the girls openly that the Board of Visitors of Armagh prison was unanimous in its opposition to strip searching but that they were powerless to do anything about it. Some members had asked how the male members of the N. Ireland Office would like their wives, mothers and daughters to be stripped and visually examined. Mr. Prior fails to say that it was on the occasion of the girl being sick menstruating that

the two visitors sought to observe the search, an unfortunate occasion when the two girls were forcibly stripped of all their clothes on return from court. Another question arises - were the visitors to observe the visual examination of the girls' private parts?

Questions 14 and 15 from Mr McNamara were as follows:-

Mr McNamara asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) how many officers engaged in strip searches at Armagh prison have medical qualifications; and if he will list the qualifications held in each case;

(2) on how many occasions a doctor has been present at the strip searches of prisoners at Armagh prison.

Mr Prior: The Women officers who carry out the search procedures do not have medical qualifications; only hospital officers have these. However, the search involves only a brief visual inspection - no contact is involved - and it has not been necessary to ask a doctor to be present during such a search.

Catherine Creaney

Question No. 16 of Mr McNamara concerned Catherine Creaney, a young offender in the Young Offender Centre, a separate institution within the confines of the general complex of Armagh Prison. The young offenders are also subjected to being stripped naked.

Mr McNamara asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland why Catherine Creaney, at present in prison in Armagh prison, was placed in solitary confinement from 31 January to 7 February with only a mattress and a Bible; why for three of those days she was without a mattress; and if he will make a statement.

Mr Prior: Miss Creaney was confined to her cell from 1 February to 6 February 1983 as a punishment awarded for offences against prison rules. Between 22 September 1982 and 3 February 1983, Miss Creaney was found guilty of 23 separate offences, 13 of which involved actual threatened assault.

At all times during her period of cellular confinement, she was able to retain in her cell her chair, bed and Bible. Her mattress was removed from breakfast time to late afternoon. On no occasion was she left without her mattress at night.

Note:-

This question was tabled by Mr Kevin McNamara at the request of Fr John Bradley, Portadown. Fr Bradley had written to Lord Gowrie on 15 February 1983 and did not receive an answer. He had

explained to Lord Gowrie his pastoral experience regarding the circumstances of Miss Creaney. Fr Bradley wrote again to Lord Gowrie and Mr McNamara on 1st March 1983 - "As (1st March 1983) there has been no response to my letter I went to Armagh prison today to see Catherine Creaney for myself. I was told Catherine Creaney was in the prison's hospital wing and I was conducted to that part of the prison I gathered was the hospital wing. I have never seen anything more unlike a hospital in my twenty six years visiting hospitals: I found Catherine Creaney sitting on top of a hot radiator beside a window in a bare room - bare floors, bare walls - no place to lie down except on the bare boards. In addition, her mother told me that today that when she visited her, the girl was in her bare feet. I understand this isolation has been fairly retracted. She told me that her sentence had expired and that she was being held on to serve a further sixty or more days.

The Belfast Telegraph of 1st March carried much of Fr Bradley's letter of 15 February on which Mr McNamara based his written question.

Fr Bradley wrote to Mr McNamara again on 5 March -

"I see in today's paper you raised her case yesterday in the House. I would not agree with Mr Prior's reply: certainly when I saw her in Armagh Prison on 1st March last there was no bed, no chair, no mattress, no bible - that I could see; the room was really bare. A chair was brought in for me but Catherine Creaney was left sitting on top of a hot radiator. Could it be that the Secretary of State is given inaccurate information?"

Fr Denis Faul also complained publicly that since her short sentence from October 1982 Catherine had lost 64 days remission and had suffered cellular solitary confinement for 62 days; the latest punishment of 20 days was in the prison hospital when a little ward there was turned into a punishment cell.

Argument of Northern Ireland Office

To all this mounting criticism of the stripping naked of the girls the N. Ireland Office sent out a stereotyped reply to all correspondents in mid-February. This is the relevant part of their argument:-

"It may be helpful if I describe the search procedure at Armagh in some detail. The prisoner is shown into an enclosed cubicle where, in complete privacy, she removes her clothing and passes them out to a woman prison officer for searching. While she is in the cubicle she may put on a prison-made top and skirt or, if she prefers, a sheet which she wears while her clothes are being

searched. She is then briefly visually examined while still in the cubicle by one female prison officer to ensure that she has not hidden any item on her person. She does not have to stand about naked, as has been suggested nor is she seen by other prisoners or groups of staff. There is no question of any prodding or probbing by the officer carrying out the search, nor is there any internal search.

I should say that all prisoners in Armagh are subject to the search procedure when entering or leaving the prison, and that the majority accept it without complaint or apparent embarrassment. However, certain prisoners are making strenuous efforts to have the full search procedures stopped by seeking to persuade people who have a sincere and proper interest in the fair treatment of prisoners, and the disadvantaged generally, that the searches are both inhumane and unjustified."

A few comments are necessary here. All the girls resent the strip searches. Those who have protested have been forcibly stripped and have suffered injuries. Further they have been punished by long periods of solitary confinement, some of them for 30 days. No girls could stick such hassle; especially those attending court each day, and some of these have been stripped naked and visually examined more than 120 times. Without apparent embarrassment? On being asked how he would like if his daughter was stripped naked and had her genitals and anus examined by a stranger, one prison authority member replied that he wouldn't mind, that his daughter belonged to another generation who didn't care about such things. A question - if there is no internal search or probing and prodding of the vagina and anus, why do the male members of N. Ireland Office and their ministers insist on the visual examination of genitals and anus?

Ballymascanlon Inter-Church Meeting

On 3 March 125 representatives from Ireland's churches gathered at Ballymascanlon for an inter-church meeting. The subject for the afternoon was "The Pastoral Role of the Church to those in Prison". Four papers by prison chaplains were circulated and they made brief comments to introduce them. There was some confusion when it became clear that the press had been excluded from this session. No doubt there will be an inquiry into who was responsible for this ban on the press. The Catholic chaplains from Dublin said that they had no idea that their papers would be withheld from the press when they wrote them. In fact they would have liked the press to have them. In the general debate that followed Cardinal Ó Fiaich was the first speaker. He outlined the problems of Irish prisoners in British jails in Great Britain and

the concern felt for the hardships of relatives who visited them. He opened up the whole question of the transfer of such prisoners to Ireland where they would be near their families. He also expressed his grave concern at the introduction of the new procedures of strip-searching in Armagh Jail and its immoral nature. As Fr Raymond Murray was the only chaplain to the women's prison present, he outlined in graphic detail the situation there from the Holywood and Girdwood men first housed there in 1971-1972 and the subsequent Strasbourg Commission and Court dimension right down to the stripping naked of the girls. There were cries of SHAME when he described these strip searches. Two women speakers immediately voiced their protest at such degradation, one of them a distinguished doctor and the other a leading university lecturer in criminology. Fr Denis Faul said that the motive of the searching in this manner was not security. That could be done with the usual body searches.

Picket at Armagh Jail

On 6 March a well attended picket at Armagh Jail condemned the strip searches. The protest was held to mark International Women's Day. The picket was organised by the London based feminist group, the Armagh Co-ordinating Committee.

Organisation of Concerned Teachers

On Saturday 12 March the Organisation of Concerned Teachers, at a fringe meeting during the Irish National Teachers' Organisation's annual conference at Derry, called on trade unionists and women's organisations to speak out against strip searching in Armagh Prison. The group made a special plea to branches of the INTO in the North to pass resolutions condemning the practice. And executive members sent a message of support to Cardinal O Fiaich for his condemnation at Ballymascanlon of the government's policy.

House of Commons

On 15 March the strip searching was again raised by Mr Kevin McNamara MP in the House of Commons. There was a notable change in attitude. Mr Prior spoke in less rigid terms -

"All prisoners leaving and entering Armagh prison are searched. The procedure may involve a strip search. The need for these procedures is kept under review, and it has proved possible recently to reduce the frequency of the strip searching of prisoners attending court for short remand hearings, who make up the majority of cases to which such searches have been applied."

Mr Prior gave an account of the incident which led to the introduction of strip searches in Armagh Prison in November 1982 -

"On 22 October 1982, in the course of a detailed search of cells, two keys were found in the possession of two remand prisoners. Investigations revealed that the keys were from the doors in a court building to which the prisoners had been taken for a remand hearing and had been smuggled into the prison by the prisoners. The implications of this breach of security were carefully considered and it was decided to replace the routine rub-down searches with strip searching, which is in regular use in prisons in Great Britain."

Note:-

A number of weeks were allowed to lapse before this decision was taken. The two girls, non-political, are now in the Young Offenders Centre, Armagh Prison. They had taken the keys from a ledge in the ante-room of the magistrates' court. There they were being guarded by members of the RUC. Should the small keys have been left lying there in the first place, and have any security personnel been punished? As it happened the authority in the prison at the time of the incident treated the girls lightly when they explained the story.

Mr McNamara asked questions about strip searches of female prisoners in Great Britain.

Mr Kevin McNamara (Kingston upon Hull Central): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, how many strip searches of female prisoners have taken place in prisons in England and Wales from 1st November 1982 until the nearest convenient date.

Mr David Mellor:

No central records are held; following information which has been obtained from establishments holding female prisoners relates to strip searches carried out during routine cell searches and special searches authorised by the Governor, Deputy Governor or Chief Officer. The total number of searches recorded is 1430 between 1st November 1982 and 13th March 1983 inclusive. In addition, standing instructions provide that every prisoner is to be strip searched on every reception into, and discharge from, a prison establishment and on location in the segregation unit.

Mr Kevin McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, how many strip searches of female prisoners have taken place in prisons in Scotland since 1 November 1982 until the nearest convenient date.

Mr Allan Stewart:

1,607 strip searches of female prisoners took place in Scottish prisons in the period from 1 November

1982 to 14 March 1983. This figure includes searches on admission, transfer and discharge, following visits and for routine and special security purposes.

Note:

There is not the same visual examination of the female private parts in English or Scottish prisons. Recently two political female prisoners in England were asked about Strip Searching. They said the only place they were stripped naked was in the police station. They tried to make them strip in the prison but the women refused. They took off dresses, coats, blouses but not underclothes etc. Every change of personnel brought a new attempt but they always refused. The women said that if they wanted to strip search them they would have to tear the clothes off them, and they did not insist.

In answer to other questions Mr Prior replied that metal detectors were available at the prison and are used during ordinary rub-down searches; X-ray equipment is not used for searching prisoners. Machines for detecting explosives are not available or used at Armagh Prison; the effectiveness of these items of equipment is not such that an acceptable level of security can be achieved by their use alone. Mr Prior said that a routine appearance at Armagh Magistrates' Court would mean the prisoner being outside Armagh Prison for 30 to 45 minutes; he said the possibility of contact between members of the public and prisoners from Armagh Prison when prisoners attended the court could not be ruled out.

A Prisoner's Account - March 1983

What is the reply of the prisoner to this civil service argument? Fr Denis Faul circulated the following to the media and to friends of human rights problems.

Enclosed please find an account by a woman prisoner in Armagh Prison regarding the Strip Searching there and dated March 1983.

My fellow diocesan, Father Raymond Murray, chaplain Armagh Prison, has already officially protested about this degradation of the prisoners. I enclose this statement to add to the documentation.

What was once a routine two minute court appearance each week for remand prisoners has turned into a virtual nightmare for many women in Armagh Gaol. Under the innocent title of RECEPTION SEARCHES the Northern Ireland Office has brought into force a procedure which is designed to humiliate and degrade.

Each week we, the remand prisoners awaiting trial, are brought down to an area in the prison called the Reception. This contains two small cubicles.

We are told to go into these and strip. A curtain is fastened across the cubicle from about waist high to the floor. You are always in view of the prison staff who sometimes number as many as ten. As you strip, you become very aware of how little protection the curtain affords you. When you are naked your body from the waist up is visible to all the prison staff in the room. You are then told to hand over all your clothes. These are taken away and searched. Once your clothes have gone you are asked if you want a gown. This comes in two parts. The TOP consists of a strip of material which slips over the head and consists of two panels, back and front, which are not joined. The BOTTOM part is similar to a mini-skirt. Again it is two separate panels - the purpose of this is to enable the prison staff to raise the material and inspect your body. NO woman has ever agreed to wear these distasteful garments. Apart from adding to the already tense embarrassment, they would only tend to prolong the strip search.

After the "gowns" have been refused, a bed sheet is offered. If you accepted the sheet, you would have to wrap it around yourself and then open it to have your body inspected. This also only serves to prolong the strip searching, so the sheets are also refused.

While you are naked, you are asked if you have a PERIOD. If you have, you are forced to remove your sanitary protection. A paper bag is provided for your tampon or towel. The bag is then opened and the contents examined. Your body is then inspected. You are told to turn completely around so as no part of your body is left unseen.

Anyone with LONG HAIR is ordered to gather their hair up in their hands and hold it on top of their heads. This, say the women, makes the entire sordid affair seem like a slave trade market. When the strip searching is finished, clothes are returned and we are allowed to dress.

Next we are brought into a POLICE VAN and from then on we are in police custody. After arriving at court, we make a brief appearance, and I should stress have no contact with the public.

Most women are returned to the prison from the local court in Armagh in less than a half hour, but after a lapse of less than thirty minutes, these same women are again subjected to these cruel searches.

Unfortunately others who are on trial have been forced to strip twice daily, five days a week, for the past three months. These women include a 43-year old mother of three, a 29 year old mother of five, and a young girl of 20 years. A 51 year old mother of a large family also endured twice daily strip searching for nearly a month. A woman in an advanced state of pregnancy was forced to strip twice inside fourteen hours. Needless to say there

was no medical supervision in that case, as there is no medical supervision in any of the searches.

The Northern Ireland Office has said that the strip searches are necessary in the interest of security. The authorities say they can stop them if they choose. They have been asked to reintroduce the old method of searching called "frisk" and to use the metal detectors available in the prison. The authorities say that metal detectors do not find paper. What piece of paper would damage security in the prison? Where or how would the women obtain such paper while in police custody?

The mounting criticism of the strip search procedures prompted an editorial in the *Irish News*, 14 March:-

Action Required

Father Raymond Murray, a chaplain at the prison, and Father Denis Faul have performed a valuable public service by highlighting the degrading and patently needless strip searches of women remand prisoners in Armagh Jail. The searches are so unnecessary and counter-productive that even Mr Don Concannon, the senior British Labour spokesman on Northern Ireland, called on the Government last week to revise the prison regulations. Mr Prior, for reasons best known to himself turned down his request and repeated that the status quo would prevail.

In this newspaper on Thursday last Father Faul released a statement from a woman prisoner which described the search procedures in all their distasteful detail. To our knowledge her version has not been challenged by the Northern Ireland Office. We can only assume that it is an accurate account. We are disturbed and saddened by it.

Few reasonable people would deny that some basic security measures are necessary in any prison and Armagh is no exception. Few would also deny that there are many people outside the prison with a vested interest in making political capital out of the prisoners' distressing conditions. The Government's acquiescence in the regime in Armagh plays into the hands of such people.

The picture painted by the woman prisoner in her statement which appeared in the *Irish News* is one of a prison regime that is grossly unreasonable, if not draconian, and one which might precipitate a deterioration in the situation not just inside Armagh Jail but in the community outside. After the agony of the H-Blocks crisis the Government should know better than allow the sore in Armagh to needlessly fester.

Surely the Northern Ireland authorities, and particularly Lord Gowrie, the Minister with responsibility for prisons, must be asking why in God's name it is necessary to intimately search a

remand prisoner before and after a brief court appearance during which she does not come into contact with the public and is under continuous supervision? Why is it necessary to subject a 51-year-old mother to a strip search twice daily? or a pregnant woman to strip twice in 14 hours? Come to think of it, why did the Governor find it necessary to introduce strip searches last November? He has a duty to explain why he choose to embark on a course which was bound to exacerbate the situation in the jail.

Lord Gowrie is known to be a compassionate man. He should act quickly to defuse a situation that is giving rise to growing and legitimate concern.

Lord Gowrie, Deputy Secretary of State with responsibility for prisons, replied to the *Irish News* editorial on 16 March:-

I am writing in response to your leader on Monday on the issue of search procedures at Armagh women's prison.

I wish first to say directly to you and to your readers that many of the specific allegations made about the search procedures at Armagh are without foundation. For example, it is not true that a pregnant woman was strip searched twice in 14 hours. Nor is it true that a three-year-old girl was strip searched while going on a visit.

The facts are that the prison authorities have a duty to ensure safe and secure custody of prisoners committed by the courts to their care, and must take such steps as are considered necessary - within what is authorised by prison rules - for this purpose. It is regrettable that there have been many grossly inaccurate accounts of what happens when women prisoners are searched and I should like to take this opportunity to emphasise that the procedures do not involve internal searches. Indeed, the woman officer carrying out the search does not touch the prisoner at all. In the great majority of cases, the prisoners accept the search without complaint - in such cases, the prisoner is observed, very briefly, in a cubicle by one woman officer - she does not have to stand about naked and is not seen by other prisoners or groups of staff.

The method of searching at Armagh complies with that carried out in Great Britain as a routine prison procedure. In Scottish prisons for example, over 1,000 strip searches of female prisoners have taken place in the past four months.

I do accept that there is legitimate concern that prisoners, especially women, should, at all times, be treated with proper consideration. I would not tolerate - nor, I am satisfied, would my officials - a system which worked otherwise. I am satisfied that the staff at Armagh, who have a difficult job to do, perform this part of the work in as sensitive a manner as possible.

As the Secretary of State has said in the House of Commons, the need for these security procedures is kept under review and it has proved possible recently to reduce the frequency of these searches in respect of prisoners leaving the prison to attend court for short remand hearings which make up the majority of cases to which these searches have been applied.

GOWRIE

Northern Ireland Office.

Fr Denis Faul replied to Lord Gowrie in a statement issued on the evening of 16 March:-

Lord Gowrie's statement is based on 3 falsehoods.

1. He says a pregnant woman was not strip searched twice in 14 hours.
2. He denies that a 3 year old girl was strip searched while going on a visit.
3. He maintains that the strip searches in Great Britain are similar to the strip searches in Armagh Prison.

As regards the first two, I now release two statements, one from the pregnant woman herself, and the mother of the 3 year old child. For 15 years I spoke out against ill-treatment and torture in interrogation centres - I ask the public to judge who was speaking the truth in that matter.

I have checked with women who were in prison in England. Strip searches there do not mean visual examination of the anus and genitals as in Armagh. By his own admission Lord Gowrie says that this visual examination is carried out in the cubicle by one female officer. This is a violation of standard prison regulations which require searches to be carried out by two officers in all circumstances and times. The girls had to stand about naked for six weeks after these procedures were introduced. Only after criticism were the small panel clothes introduced. The girls refused to put these on because they prolonged the search and the panels were lifted up for the visual examination. This proved even more distressing. The reduction of the frequency of these strip searches is not enough. That lays the way open for abuse in particular cases. The girls, their families, and the Catholic hierarchy and clergy want an end to these immodest procedures. They are a serious invasion of a woman's privacy and treating of the person as an object.

Statement of young married woman, Belfast:-

I am 5½ months pregnant. I was remanded to Armagh Prison on 2 February 1983 with my mother, aged 56 years, and another lady aged 43 years. We were all arrested over an incident involving one of our cars being taken. We were all

charged with withholding information concerning the hi-jacking of the car. I spent overnight in prison till we all got bail the next day.

On arrival at Armagh Prison we were all put into different cubicles. I had to hand in all my possessions. I was told to take off all my clothes and was handed a small sheet to put around me. There was a half curtain across the cubicle and I was exposed completely to 3 prison female warders. I had black underwear and I was told I wasn't allowed to wear them because they were black. I told them my other underwear that I had washed in Townhall Street Police Station were still wet. I was weighed then and attempted to put the sheet around me like you would wrap a bath towel, but was told to put it around my shoulders which made the sheet shorter.

I made a comment about losing so much weight as I had been 8 stone 8 pounds at the clinic the previous Friday and was now 8 stone 3 pounds on the following Wednesday. I then went and had a bath and there again it was a half door and I was again exposed. I said I preferred not to wash my hair as it had been washed only recently. I was told I had to. When I asked how would I rinse my hair I was told "in the bath water". I was then taken to see a nurse. I had to put on my maternity dress without any underclothing. I was taken through the open courtyard to the main prison with my hair soaking wet. I had to climb up a long flight of stairs and had to keep stopping to catch my breath. My mother and the other lady, a Mrs Burns, also had to undergo the strip search. The other prisoners had to lend me some hair brushes, etc.

After spending the night there, we were put into a prison van which had small cubicles in it. It was a very rough ride to the Crumlin Road Court House. Before we left the prison we all had to undergo a strip search like the previous one - all clothes off; then these were taken away and inspected, then returned. We were all granted bail on Thursday and have to report once a week to a police station until the case is heard. Signed:

Witnessed: Clara Reilly 13/3/83

Statement of Mrs Rita McKenna, Unity Flats, Belfast. Aged 26 years.

My first visit to Armagh prison to see my cousin Elizabeth McWilliams was on 23 December 1982. I went in the afternoon. My little daughter Toni now aged 3½ years was with me. There were two female officers present for my visit. One looked at the contents of my bag. The other one asked me to take off my coat, gave me a body search, a rub down my body, and asked me to remove my shoes.

She gave Toni a body search, talked away to her and did not remove any of her clothes or shoes.

The second time I visited Elizabeth was on Saturday 5 February 1983 in the afternoon. I took the 1.30 p.m. bus from Belfast to Armagh. Toni, my daughter, aged 3½ years, was with me. There were two female officers again. They gave me the usual search - I had to take off my coat and shoes, and the usual body search rub down. One of them asked me did I want to take in my purse with me to the visit and I said I didn't. I had just finished speaking to her when I turned around and the other officer was searching Toni. Toni was wearing a baize duffle coat. The officer had taken the coat off her. She was taking her shoes off her to take her leg warmers off. I said - "She has only a pair of socks below those." She went on ahead and took her shoes off. Then the officer took the leg warmers off the child. When she took the leg warmers off her, she went to take down her little tight fitting green trousers. I said to her - "If you want to take those off her, I'll pull them down." The officer went on ahead and took the child's trousers down. She then took the child's panties down to her knees. The panties were tight on her. The leg warmers and shoes were completely off. She still had her socks on her. I said to her - "There is no call for that. There is nothing there." She said "If I don't do this, you won't get into the visit." I said - "I was down here before and they never done that on her". She just gave a smirk. Then I took Toni from her and pulled up her panties and trousers. I walked out the door, carrying Toni, her shoes, her coat and her leg warmers in my hand. I was very confused going out with everything in my hand. As soon as I went into Elizabeth I told her - I said "Elizabeth, they gave me a terrible time in there.

They took Toni's trousers and pants down". Elizabeth said - "You shouldn't have let them." I said - "But she told me I wouldn't get in." Toni even sensed that I was upset. I told Elizabeth I had offered to do it. I had to bring her into the toilets where we wait for our visit to fix her, to fix her petticoat and clothes. I wouldn't bring Toni back again. The reason I brought Toni down was because Elizabeth loves to see the kids.

On that day we were the last people getting a visit because the names had been changed on the visiting card. The officers had asked me what time and day I had phoned to get the visit names changed. Joseph McCloskey's name was on it and I got it changed to mine. Michael McCloskey, Mrs McCloskey, myself and Toni, all then had the visit with Elizabeth.

Everybody in the waiting room heard me complain about the incident and saw me go into the toilet to fix Toni up.

Signed: Rita McKenna
Witnessed: Clara Reilly 6/3/83

Stripping Prisoners of Respect

The remand prisoners in Armagh Prison also answered Lord Gowrie in a letter to the **Irish News** 25 March:-

In response to Lord Gowrie's letter (16/3/83) to your paper regarding the strip-searching here in Armagh Jail, I feel that, as a so-called 'Minister of Prisons' he must be very ill-informed or totally ignorant of the situation here. His attempts to gloss over a disgusting and immoral procedure will not fool the nationalist people, neither will it minimise the degradation of such a NIO policy. There have been no "inaccurate accounts" of the strip-searching, merely the facts. His denial in reference to the pregnant woman and the three-year-old child being strip-searched was to be expected. He cannot justify these events, so his only alternative is to deny they occurred. The case of the three-year-old child now lies in the hands of a solicitor.

I strenuously dispute Gowrie's suggestion that "the majority of prisoners accept the strip-search without complaint" - each Republican POW (of which there are 30 and majority in jail) sent a board form in November 1982 to the Secretary of State complaining of this degrading practice. Also we Remands, being the most affected by the strip-searching, have no other choice, but to comply as we must make our weekly remand appearances at court. In the past, when we refused to comply, we were forcibly held to the ground by 10 wardresses and forcibly stripped naked. This resulted in us women being charged with a breach of prison rules and placed in solitary confinement. Does Lord Gowrie suggest we should refuse to comply? In reference to his short account of the strip-search itself, Lord Gowrie stated: "The prisoner is observed very briefly". This is completely untrue, we are stripped naked and a visual examination is carried out on every part of our bodies by whatever prison staff are present at the time. If, as Lord Gowrie seems to believe, that it is very brief, why then is it necessary at all?

Strip-searching is not carried out in the interests of security. Armagh courthouse stands a mere 200 yards from the prison and each of us remand prisoners is locked into a single "cell" compartment inside a sealed transit van. We are transported in this to the courthouse, our only

contact is with the RUC who escort each of us to the courtroom and back to the prison van.

These are the cold hard facts of the issue. Nice respectable phrased statements in defence of strip-searches by Gowrie and the NIO cannot alter the fact that strip-searching is an immoral and degrading practice geared not only to strip Republican prisoners of their clothing but also of their self-respect!

REPUBLICAN REMAND POW.

B3 Wing.
Armagh Gaol

House of Commons Armagh Prison

Mr Kevin McNamara MP tabled more written questions, answered by Mr Prior 18 March:-

Mr McNamara asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland whether any warning was given to prisoners in Her Majesty's prison Armagh, that strip searches would be introduced if prisoners were found smuggling items into the prison.

Mr Prior: No.

Mr McNamara asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland whether prior to 22 October 1982, there had been any reports of prisoners in Her Majesty's prison, Armagh, attempting to smuggle items into the prison.

Mr Prior: There have been various occasions when it has been suspected that prisoners at Armagh have brought in unauthorised items; but it would not be appropriate for me to give details.

Mr McNamara asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland whether the usual examination of prisoners subject to strip search in Her Majesty's prison, Armagh, involves an internal viewing of the body orifices.

Mr Prior: No.

Mr McNamara asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland whether, since the introduction of strip searches into Her Majesty's prison, Armagh, any prisoners have been found in possession of illegal items while being searched; and what items.

Mr. Prior: No items have been discovered during searches since October 1982.

Mr McNamara asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many prisoners in Her Majesty's prison, Armagh, have been charged before the governor, the board of visitors or courts with smuggling items into Armagh prison; and which items.

Mr Prior: Possession of unauthorised articles can be dealt with under prison rules by confiscation or by disciplinary proceedings.

During the six months from 1 August 1982 to 28 February 1983, six prisoners were charged before the governor with possession of unauthorised articles. The articles were keys, letters and cigarettes.

It is not possible to say with certainty that all the articles had been smuggled in by the prisoners themselves.

Mr McNamara asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the criteria now used for deciding to strip search a prisoner attending court for a remand hearing from Her Majesty's prison, Armagh.

Mr Prior: These are matters for operational judgment, and it would not be appropriate for me to go into detail.

Mr McNamara asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland whether metal detectors had been in use in examining remand prisoners in Her Majesty's Prison, Armagh, before the discovery of the two keys discovered in the search of Her Majesty's prison, Armagh on 22 October.

Mr Prior: No.

Prisoners (Searches)

Mr McNamara asked the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in how many and which prisons in Northern Ireland metal detectors and explosive detectors are used for searching prisoners.

Mr Prior: Metal detectors are used as an aid in searches of prisoners in Maze (Cellular), Magilligan and Armagh prisons. Equipment for detecting explosives is not used in any prison establishment in Northern Ireland.

CONCLUSION

The stripping naked of the women prisoners and the degrading visual examination that follows is not about security. It is part of the whole failure to give the Catholic nationalist people of the North of Ireland a stake in their country. After 15 years of strife the British Government refuses to give well-meaning people a share in government. Still the new figures in the census must show that it is more than dangerous to overlook such a substantial people. Catholics are approximately half the population in N. Ireland. The census game has put paid to the propaganda of referring to the Catholics, the greatest single denomination in the North of Ireland, as the "Minority" as if their feelings and aspirations were too small to be taken into consideration! On the other hand the British Government accept the myth of the "Million" Protestants. By backing one side of the community Britain tries to ensure a grip on Ireland for her own selfish motives. So beatings, brutality, torture of prisoners in interrogation centres, corrupt courts, SAS, "Shoot to Kill" policy, deaths of the hunger strikers, massive punishments in prisons, are all quite acceptable to the British Government. All that means is suppression of the Catholics. The stripping naked of the girl prisoners and the horrid visual examination is symbolic of the contempt of the Northern Ireland Office administration for the feelings and rights of the nationalist people.

“HELP THE PRISONERS”

COMMITTEE

**Condemns as IMMORAL, CRUEL, INHUMAN and
DEGRADING the stripping naked of the women
prisoners in Armagh Prison.**

This disgraceful and obscene British procedure is contrary to Article 3 of the
European Convention on Human Rights.

Since November 1982, certain individual women have
been

**STRIPPED NAKED AND VISUALLY
EXAMINED 120 TIMES**

Even a 3-year-old girl was stripped while going on a visit despite her mother's
protests.

**THESE PROCEDURES HAVE
NO SECURITY VALUE**