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Pl put on file re
Government re IRA activities
etc.
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Chun an Aire Dlí agus Cirt : To the Minister for Justice.

QUESTION:

To ask the Minister for Justice if he has carried out any in-depth inquiry into the alleged ill-treatment of prisoners in this country's jails, particularly Portlaoise; and, if not, if he will do so.

- Neil T. Blaney, Paddy Keaveney.

For answer Wednesday 2 February, 1977.

ANSWER:

I am satisfied that the allegations referred to are without justification.

With your permission, a Cheann Chomhairle, I propose to circulate with the Official Report a memorandum in regard to conditions in Portlaoise Prison.

Conditions in Portlaoise Prison

1. Allegations are being made publicly by individuals and groups about conditions in Portlaoise Prison. In particular Provisional Sinn Fein, through their newspapers and by means of posters, are attempting to convince the public that the regime in the prison is unbearably and unnecessarily harsh and that this represents the deliberate policy of the Minister for Justice or of the Governor of the Prison.
2. The allegations are manifold, but particular reference is made to the strip-searching of prisoners, to the controls on visits and letters, to the prohibition on what is called free association between prisoners and to the frequency and severity of punishments for breaches of prison discipline including, in particular, the denial to some persons while under punishment of freedom to associate with the other prisoners. The matters complained of vary from time to time. One of the more surprising complaints is that no oratory or chapel is available for private meditation.
3. The prisoner population in Portlaoise at present [and for some time] numbers about 150 men, a significant proportion of them having been convicted of very serious crimes. While they are split ideologically into several groups they are a cohesive set of determined criminals such as no prison system in Europe outside this island has to deal with.
4. While it can be said of most prisoners they will escape if they can the prisoners in Portlaoise are prepared to go to great lengths to do so, particularly so it would appear on occasions when they or their associates outside the prison want one or more prisoners at large for some special purpose. This is a direct and continuing challenge to the State and the sort that must continue to be met. The special restrictions in Portlaoise are made necessary by that challenge. The cost in money terms of maintaining the prison and those restrictions is high. Resources that could be usefully employed on such things as an

expanded welfare service and the replacement of some of our older institutions have to be diverted to the containment of those prisoners.

5. As mentioned above, the prisoners are a close-knit highly organised group (or, more accurately, one large and several smaller groups). Any request (sometimes made in the form of a demand) for a change in the regime or for a concession has to be considered in the knowledge that, more often than not, it is obviously part of a general strategy to weaken the security of the prison.
6. Experience, which includes experience of successful and unsuccessful attempts at violent escape, of riots, of unprovoked attacks on individual prison officers and Gardai and of the smuggling of explosives and other materials and messages has dictated the nature of the special restrictions and controls which distinguish Portlaoise from other prisons.
7. In recent years the privilege of free association was grossly abused in that, for example, it facilitated the concealment of material in cells and the elaboration of plans for escapes and the like, and that moreover, it was imposing such a severe and costly strain on staff that the situation could not be allowed to continue. Supervision of the prisoners during the day time had to be increased and can fairly be described as close. In fine weather half of them are allowed outdoor exercise at any one time between 10.30 and noon and between 2.30 and 4.00 p.m. Those not on outdoor exercise have the option of remaining in special recreation rooms or, at their individual choice, locked in their own cells. They have also the option of working in the craft shop but, as is explained below, in practice they deny themselves this option by refusing to be strip-searched when leaving the shop - an essential precaution after work with craft materials and tools. Having regard to the constraints on space imposed by the need to keep the various groups of prisoners separated as far as

possible to prevent violence between them and also imposed by the size of the prison itself, the recreational facilities are as good as can be provided consistent with the maintenance of the necessary level of security.

8. Strip-searching of prisoners has been played-up emotively and is, of course, a distasteful procedure though how distasteful it is depends on whether the prisoner behaves reasonably. It is necessary to prevent the smuggling of contraband - including explosives. The allegation has been made that prisoners have been strip-searched repeatedly and, by implication, capriciously. This is untrue. Occasionally it may happen that a particular prisoner may be required to undergo two or even three strip searches in a short space of time but that would be because of special circumstances and would be quite fortuitous.
9. Visitors to Portlaoise have to undergo a brief rub-down search and they are permitted to speak to the prisoners only through a metal-grille. This latter precaution was shown to be necessary when a woman visitor was found to have passed explosives to a prisoner which she had brought into the prison concealed in her vagina.
10. Visitors tend to come on Saturdays and the chaotic situation in the visiting rooms when several visits were going on simultaneously was a serious security risk since it was impossible to be sure that messages in relation to escape attempts (timing being all important in this respect) were not passing. Moreover the identity of the visitors was often unknown to the prison staff. The number of visitors allowed on any one day is now limited and proof of identity is required. The prisoners have so far refused to cooperate in operating a system whereby intending visitors would be allocated a definite day and time for the visit thus avoiding possible disappointment to them. Such a system has been offered to them.
11. Allegations that prisoners were denied letters at Christmas are quite untrue. During the month of December, 1976, prisoners in Portlaoise Prison received a total of 1,138 letters and 1,402 Christmas cards.

In general prisoners may write two letters per week and receive all incoming mail. All mail is censored and certain material is blanked out e.g. reference to prison matters. Incoming letters are not allowed unless they have been signed fully and have the full address of the writer. Letters are not allowed from persons who are not allowed visits.

12. The complaint made on behalf of the prisoners that is being played-up most of all at present is that discipline is harsh and they are, in effect, being driven into the ground. What is particularly significant and reprehensible is that attempts are made to pin responsibility for the alleged harshness on the prison staff. The Minister for Justice wants it to be understood that he is completely satisfied that the Governor and staff are acting reasonably and to his explicit instructions, and that the level of discipline in the prison is what must be imposed because it is necessary. Staff in the prison have been subjected to assaults, threats and abuse and, in general, the prisoners try to make the running of the prison as difficult as possible. Breaches of discipline are dealt with firmly, but not inhumanely or otherwise than in accordance with the Prison Rules. The Rules provide that prisoners under punishment may be segregated from the others for a period not exceeding 3 months - but such punishment is imposed only for very serious breaches of discipline. During this period they must take outdoor exercise each day on their own and remain in their cells for the rest of the time. No dietary punishment is imposed on them and their meals are brought to their cells. They are supplied with slippers rather than shoes in such circumstances because experience has shown that it is necessary to remove the shoes of prisoners in segregation: they have literally kicked out the doors on occasion.
13. Suggestions that the prisoners in Portlaoise are at the mercy of vindictive and inhumane staff are false and at times malicious. The efforts that have been made to discredit the Visiting Committee of local citizens are vicious in the extreme. The reality is that they discharge their duties in a most conscientious manner and deal fully and carefully with any complaints made to them by the prisoners. Furthermore the Governor and his staff are at all times willing to meet the prisoners in any way where legitimate and reasonable requests are made.