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Long Kesh Protest

1. While approximately 650 of the 1,900 prisoners in Long Kesh - those convicted of offences committed before March 1976 - enjoy special category status and are detained in segregated and relatively open compounds, the remaining 1,250 inmates occupy cells in the prison's H-Blocks.

2. The protest which began in 1976 among Republican prisoners at the decision to phase out special category status and which involves refusal to wear prison clothes or to undertake prison work was intensified in March of this year. For the past eight months approximately 330 of the prisoners in H-Blocks 3 and 5 have been refusing to wash, clean out their cells or empty slop buckets. The cumulative effect is that these two blocks are now disgustingly filthy and unhygienic. The prison authorities have responded, to what in their view is a breach of prison rules, by imposing a strict regime which involves the elimination of all but statutorily prescribed exercise and study opportunities, restrictions on visits and receipt of parcels. Conditions have been exacerbated by the refusal of many of the prisoners to avail of even these limited facilities because they may involve wearing prison clothes.

3. Archbishop O'Fiaich issued a statement on the protest on 1 August which was generally regarded as being more favourable to the prisoners than any previous comments by members of the Catholic hierarchy. In particular it was noted that no mention was made of the fact that the conditions were largely self-inflicted. From what is known of the privately critical reaction to the statement among certain SDLP leaders as well as non-political leaders in the Catholic community it is unlikely that the Archbishop's statement will have any significant impact on the general indifference which has to-date characterised reaction to the protest among the minority. There is however always the danger that this situation could change very quickly if the protest were to result in fatalities among the prisoners.

4. In private contacts with British representatives we have taken the line that (a) the conditions in the H-Blocks were a matter for concern; and (b) it should be possible to take some measures to improve the situation without any concession on the principle of special category status and that (c) as long as conditions remain bad the Provisional IRA had a potent weapon which they might use in minority areas. The Minister for Foreign Affairs discussed the situation in Long Kesh with Mr. Mason during the course of the latter's visit to Dublin on 20 September and indicated that anything which could be done to take the tension out of the confrontation on aspects which did not involve questions of principle would be welcome. Subsequent to that conversation the Secretary of State outlined in a personal letter to the Minister, dated 16 October, his assessment of the situation in the prison and repeated that the British Government will not be deflected from its policy of phasing out special category status. He emphasised that while the protesting prisoners have lost certain privileges because of their action they retain their statutory entitlements to visits, exercise, medical facilities etc. The letter states that apart from a few minor skin conditions, no prisoner has been found to be suffering from any illness, physical or mental attributable to the protest. The operation of the new steam-cleaning equipment in use in the prison is also described.

5. Four prisoners taking part in the protest lodged formal complaints about conditions in the prison with the European Commission on Human Rights in Strasbourg last August. It was revealed in the press on 20 October that the Commission has decided to communicate the complaints to the British Government. While this in no sense represents a determination by the Commission on the matter the relative speed with which complaints have been taken up in Strasbourg and the obviously serious examination which they are being given is reportedly a source of considerable annoyance to the British authorities.