

## NATIONAL ARCHIVES

### IRELAND



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## LETTER CONCERNING ARMAGH PRISON

You will no doubt have heard and read a great deal about the situation in that part of Armagh prison where the protest is taking place against the refusal of special category status. Many of these reports have been totally untrue or misleading, and I am taking the unusual step of writing to you and all the parents or next-of-kin of all the protesting prisoners to explain the true facts on the main points at issue.

I should like to say, first of all, that I fully understand how anxious you must be about conditions there. That is why I am so concerned about the false reports which one reads.

As you know, all women prisoners in Northern Ireland are allowed to wear their own clothes. If you wish to send in any items of clothing, in the same way that you used to before the present form of protest began, these will be accepted at the prison and handed out.

Secondly I should like to repeat the assurance, which the Secretary of State gave in his statement on 26 March, that none of the women prisoners has been "denied access to toilets". There must obviously be a restriction on how many prisoners can be allowed out of their cells for this purpose at any one time, but any prisoner who asks to go is allowed to do so either immediately or as soon as possible. Lest there is any misunderstanding about the toilet facilities available, I should perhaps point out that the ground floor of A Wing at Armagh has one bath, one shower, four washhand basins and three WCs.

There have even been reports that the women prisoners have been refused any, or sufficient, sanitary towels when they need them. This is totally untrue - they are allowed as many as they need.

It is also totally untrue that any of the prisoners have been attacked or assaulted by staff. The Governor would not tolerate this kind of behaviour by his officers.

I find it sad that the women prisoners should be refusing to take clean sheets and towels when these are offered to them. They can have these items whenever they choose to take them; similarly they can have back all their personal toilet items, which they sent out early in February, whenever they decide that they would like to have them.

I should also like to say a word about transistor radios, which the prisoners have sent out. The prisoners can have these sent back at any time, and the Governor will allow them to buy batteries from the prison tuck shop.

You will know that women prisoners continue, within reasons, to have no restriction on the number of letters which they may send or receive.

The Government cannot stop the women prisoners from fouling their cells and denying themselves various facilities to make their regime more comfortable and humane, if that is what they insist on doing. All possible steps are taken to maintain the health and welfare of the protesting prisoners and despite the unpleasant conditions which they have created for themselves there is no evidence of any illness resulting from such conditions.

My purpose in writing to you is merely to draw attention to the true facts about the nature of the present situation and to some of the facilities which are available if the prisoners choose to accept them.

I hope that you find what I have said helpful.

Yours sincerely

MICHAEL ALISON