

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2010/19/1694
Creation Date(s):	April 1980
Extent and medium:	2 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Access Conditions:	Open
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LETTER CONCERNING MAZE PRISON

I expect you have heard or read about the additional measures which have recently been taken to improve the conditions of those prisoners at Maze who are protesting against the refusal of special category status. There have been many quite misleading reports about these conditions and the new measures, and I am taking the unusual step of writing to you and to all the parents or next-of-kin of the protesting prisoners to explain what we have done.

I should like to say, first of all, that I fully understand how anxious you must be about conditions in the prison and recognise that contacts with family and friends are very important in this connection. For our part we believe we have an obligation to ensure that all possible steps are taken to maintain the health and welfare of the prisoners taking part in the protest, despite the unpleasant conditions which they have created for themselves. The doctors are continuing to monitor the situation closely and there is no evidence of any illness resulting from such conditions.

It was to help in maintaining contact that the arrangements, announced by the Secretary of State on 26 March, were introduced. These would enable you to have much more opportunity for communication; you, and other members of the family or friends, can now have an additional visit in addition to the statutory monthly visit, and the Governor will also consider any applications by individual prisoners for further visits, for example for particular family or domestic reasons.

In addition, all the prisoners taking part in the protest are now permitted to write and receive a letter every week instead of one a month. All each prisoner has to do is, in his cell, ask for the letter and pen and these will be given to him.

The third of the new measures relates to exercise. I have always been concerned about the prisoners' refusal to take their daily exercise; this achieves nothing and is very much against their own best interests. Arrangements have now been made for all the protesting prisoners to take their daily exercise in short-sleeved PT vest, shorts and plimsolls. All these items are available, and I hope you will accept that it is very desirable that the men should take advantage of what has been laid on.

These measures are additional to the steps already taken to make a selection of books and newspapers available in each wing of the cell-blocks housing the protesting prisoners. There is no truth in reports that the prisoners have to put on prison uniform before they can collect a newspaper or book.

I hope you will find this explanation helpful. I should perhaps add, in view of the misleading reports which I am constantly reading in newspapers, that there is no question of the men taking part in the protest being prevented from using the toilets or showers. Any prisoner who wishes to use these facilities has only to ask.

Yours sincerely

MICHAEL ALISON