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15 July 1981

The following statement was issued by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Rt Hon Humphrey Atkins MP, today:-

In my statements of 30 June and 8 July I set out once again the Government's clearly stated position in relation to the hunger strikes and the prisons protest in Northern Ireland. I also made it clear that the Government shared the concern which has been expressed in responsible quarters. I am grateful for the efforts that have been made in recent days. The Government deeply regrets that the hunger strikes are continuing and has naturally been considering further what steps it can properly take to persuade those concerned to end their action.

The Government has received an offer from the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit the prisons concerned in Northern Ireland under that part of its statutes which enables it to study the conditions of prisoners other than prisoners of war. The Committee has made it clear that its offer of assistance is made, not on the basis of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 which deal with the conditions of prisoners of war, but in exercise of its right to take humanitarian initiatives. I have decided to take up the ICRC's offer to visit the Northern Ireland Prisons concerned. A team from the ICRC will begin its work forthwith.

The ICRC have made it clear to the Government that the sole aim of their visit will be to assess and, if necessary, to make recommendations to improve the conditions of imprisonment in Northern Ireland.

It is the practice of the Committee to follow up an initial visit with subsequent visits and reports and I shall arrange for this to be done in Northern Ireland if the Committee so wishes.