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25/4/4

Mr. Lillis

Mr. Collins

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Meeting between Taoiseach and relatives of H-Block
hunger strikers Government Buildings -
27th July 1981

30/7/81

1. The Taoiseach received a group of 16 relatives of the hunger strikers at 3.20 p.m. The Minister-Designate for Foreign Affairs accompanied the Taoiseach. Also present were Mr. Lillis, Department of the Taoiseach, Mr. Hourican, Government Press Secretary and Mr. Whelan, Department of Foreign Affairs. The meeting lasted for about 45 minutes and ended with the group of relatives walking out in protest at what they alleged to be the unhelpful attitude of the Taoiseach and the Government. During the meeting, the interventions from the relatives' side were emotional and repetitive, and frequently abusive. The group on the whole was not amenable to the reasoned position put forward by the Taoiseach and there was very little common ground between the two sides.

2. The Taoiseach began by welcoming the visitors to this third meeting between them since he came to office. He made the following points of substance:-

- since the last meeting, and indeed since he took office, the Taoiseach and his colleagues had been in almost daily contact with the British authorities with a view to securing a resolution of the problem. Such contacts were continuing even as today's meeting was going on.
- the Government's influence could only be exercised in one direction - in search of a humanitarian solution. The Government's views on the PIRA were in no way affected by the attitude adopted to date by the British authorities.
- the Government's approach had suffered a setback with the evidently hardline statement of 18th July issued on behalf of the prisoners. Moreover, inaccurate press reports of the Government's position on the visit of an NIO official to the Maze on 21st July had confused matters. The Irish newspapers of 24th July set out a clear picture of where the Government stood.
- the relatives remained the best contacts available to the Government on the condition of the hunger strikers. The Taoiseach said that he would welcome suggestions from the relatives on further steps the Government might consider.

3. There followed a series of questions and allegations from several of the relatives, which may be summarised as follows:-

- Why had the Taoiseach not responded favourably to Kieran Doherty's request to visit him in prison?
- The NIO official's visit on 21st July was deliberately timed for 2.00 a.m., when the hunger strikers would not be fully alert, in order to weaken their resolve and pressurise them into giving up the strike.
- What further pressure did the Taoiseach propose to put on the British, to save the life of "one of your own T.D.'s"?
- What was the Taoiseach's position on the "five demands"?
- Why would the Taoiseach not: expel the British Ambassador, withdraw the Irish Ambassador in London, (and instruct him not attend the British Royal Wedding); and withdraw Army units from border areas. Would the Taoiseach not support a prison regime for the Maze similar to that which operated in Port Laoise?
- The relatives were "convinced" that the Taoiseach and Government had the key to the solution but (according to one relative) was not using it "for fear of embarrassing the British establishment".

4. In reply, the Taoiseach dealt with each of the points raised. He said he did not respond to Mr. Doherty's request because what he was seeking was impracticable. No Irish Government leader had ever gone into a prison to discuss the régime there with one of the prisoners. In any case, there was no difficulty in ascertaining what Mr. Doherty was looking for. As to why the NIO official had gone into the Maze at 2.00 a.m., it should be remembered that Fr. McEldowney had asked for the official to go in urgently, so as to avoid the delay which had arisen on this issue at the time of the death of a previous hunger striker (McDonnell). Whatever else the British might be faulted for, they could not reasonably be blamed for responding for once in a swift and efficient manner. The Taoiseach stressed that his efforts would continue without interruption to secure a settlement. He could not accept that unusual steps should be taken in the case of Mr. Doherty. Every human life was of equal value to him and he would make every effort to save Mr. Doherty's life just as he was doing for the others on the strike. As for the "five demands", neither his nor the previous Government had taken a position on them. In regard to further means of putting pressure on Britain, the Taoiseach pointed out that emotional public protests on the part of the Government would serve no useful purpose and would be counter-productive. Not only would actions of the kind suggested have no helpful influence on the British, they would destroy the channels of communication open to us and weaken our leverage on

the British. Such actions could not bring a peaceful resolution of the problem any nearer. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that we could say far more privately to the British than we could, in terms of effectiveness, in public.

5. After about 40 minutes, eight of the 16 visitors walked out of the meeting, protesting that the Taoiseach was not dealing realistically (as they saw it) with the problem. Five minutes or so later, the remaining relatives took their leave as well.

6. The G.I.S. statement issued after the meeting is attached.

S. Whelan
Department of Foreign Affairs

28 July 1981