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Sec S. Paddy
Dumpellon A1
Mr. McKee
Ms O'Brien
BOX cod 1/5

**Secure Fax: 411**

**28 April 1997** **No of pages including this one: 3**

**To: HQ** **From: Belfast**
**For: C O Floinn** **From: K Dowling**

**Subject: Transfer of Billy Wright to Maze Prison**

1. Following the meeting on parades with John Steele today, we raised with him a number of other issues, including the decision to transfer Billy Wright to the Maze Prison. We indicated that our understanding, based on what we had heard from the British side (Joint Secretary's SF402 of 24 April refers), was that Wright, for the reasons we had discussed, was to be left at Maghaberry.

2. Explaining the change of approach in the matter, Steele said that it had involved an "extremely difficult decision" and hinted that he had not been entirely happy with it. It had been taken on "purely prison grounds", on the recommendation of the Head of the Prison Service (Alan Shannon). There had been the prospect that Wright, had he not been moved, would have proceeded with his threat to go on hunger strike and could conceivably have died in the run-up to Drumcree, with the serious implications that this would have had in terms of the security situation generally.

3. Should Wright have been left at Maghaberry, there was also the prospect that he and his followers would have attacked Catholic prisoners there and, as a consequence, would have had to have been provided with segregated conditions in the prison. The result would have been that Maghaberry's status as the only fully integrated prison would have been lost.

4. Steele clarified that Wright will be located in a block at the Maze in which INLA prisoners are already accommodated, but that he will be in a different wing of that block.

5. Separately, we have had a read-out as follows on a meeting which Minister Wheeler had in the matter on 25 April with Alan Shannon, John Steele and Jim Daniell:

   - The Minister had wished to consult with the Prison Service on his decision of the previous day to stop Wright's transfer to the Maze.

   - Shannon had responded that there had been discussions with Wright earlier in the week at which the consequences of his remaining in Maghaberry had been explored. In those discussions, Wright maintained that both his trial and the decision not to allow him separate accommodation in the Maze indicated a "political set-up" and left him no choice but to go on hunger strike from 1

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May, which, he emphasised, could lead to his death prior to Drumcree III.

- In that regard, Shannon's advice was that he believed Wright had the determination to continue with this course of action, as he perceived himself as a Protestant martyr. In addition, the Prison Service had received 30 transfer requests from prisoners, who supported Billy Wright, for a move to the Maze. These prisoners were mainly housed in Maghaberry, while some were located in Magilligan.

- Shannon further advised that if Wright went on hunger strike, then there would be undoubted sympathy from various sections of the community within Northern Ireland, mainly from Orangemen (from the Portadown area in particular) and DUP members but also, Shannon suggested, from individual members of the UUP.

- It was also possible that Wright's followers within Maghaberry could start attacking Catholic inmates which would inevitably result in requests for segregation within Maghaberry. This was something which the Prison Service was determined to avoid.

- Alternatively, they could wreck their accommodation which would result in a move to alternative accommodation. The only accommodation available was at the Maze, if the reopening of Belfast Prison (i.e. the old Crumlin Road Prison) was not to be considered. In the meantime, both the UVF prisoners in the Maze and Wright's followers were exerting pressure on prison staff through intimidation and physical attack.

- The Minister was also informed at that meeting that John White of the UDP had done a deal with Wright on the basis that, should he move to the Maze, he had given an undertaking not to seek to enlist in the LVF prisoners from the UDA. There was, however, no deal with the UVF who remained opposed to the move (in this regard, the suggestion was put forward that the UVF could be constrained, to a certain extent, by David Ervine and other members of the PUP).

- Steele had made clear that his main concern centred on the fact that giving Wright command of a double wing within the Maze strengthened the hand of the LVF and could lead to the creation of a movement of Loyalist dissidents, mainly from the UVF, who were not willing to abide by a Loyalist ceasefire. (Comment: These are among the concerns which we have been putting to the British side in connection with Wright's transfer.)

- Shannon commented that Wright was being held in solitary confinement at Maghaberry in view of advice from the RUC that his life would be at risk if he moved into normal accommodation. He currently had a minimum of 4 years of his sentence still to serve which would require either keeping him in solitary

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confinement for that length of time, or moving him to the Maze.

- Minister Wheeler indicated that he understood the difficulties that the Prison Service faced. He felt that what was paramount was the management of Wright's sentence. It would not be appropriate to hold him in solitary confinement for a period of 4 years and, equally, a hunger strike situation should be avoided. He therefore agreed that Wright should be moved to the Maze.

- As regards timing, it was agreed that the move should take place as soon as was practicable - either late that afternoon (25 April) or the following day - which would avoid further attacks on staff by the LVF.

- It was felt that it did not necessarily follow that Wright would wish to take with him all 30 of the individuals who had requested a transfer to the Maze. In this regard, Shannon commented that Alex Kerr, for instance, would undoubtedly stay in Maghaberry as he was affiliated to the UDA and was currently appealing his case.

- Steele proposed that, at a meeting which the Minister was scheduled to have with Ken Maginnis on Sunday (27 April), he might wish to explain to him the reasons for this decision, particularly as both Maginnis and the RUC were vociferously opposed to Wright's move to the Maze. The Minister had agreed to brief Maginnis in detail.

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**24 April 1997** **No of pages including this one:** 1

**To:** **HQ**
**For:** **C. O Floinn**

**From: Belfast**
**From: Joint Secretary**

**Subj: Special status for Billy Wright**

1. We understand that, bowing to our representations on the above subject (and also, no doubt, to the threat of disturbances by both Republican and Loyalist prisoners if Wright and the LVF were to be accorded special status), Sir John Wheeler decided this week that Wright should not be transferred from Maghaberry to the Maze.

2. An internal note indicated that he wishes to explore what other options may exist. The matter has, therefore, effectively been placed on hold.

ecd 24/4

PST, PSS
S/S Ó hUiginn
Counsellors A-I Section
Messrs. Teahon, Donlon & Dalton
Ambassadors London & Washington
Joint Secretary

Mr. McKeon
Ms O'Brien
BOX

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