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NORTHERN IRELAND SECRETARY MARJORIE MOWLAM'S STATEMENT ON THE REPORT OF THE NAREY INQUIRY INTO INCIDENTS AT THE MAZE PRISON

HOUSE OF COMMONS

THURSDAY 2 APRIL 1998

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Check against delivery

NAREY REPORT STATEMENT
HOUSE OF COMMONS

1. Madam Speaker, with permission, I should like to make a statement on the Report of the Narey Inquiry into incidents at the Maze prison.

2. On 10 December PIRA prisoner, Liam Averill, escaped from the Maze prison. On the following day we commissioned an independent inquiry to be undertaken by Martin Narey, the Director of Regimes in the Prison Service for England and Wales. He was asked to inquire into the circumstances surrounding the escape.

3. On 27 December LVF prisoner, Billy Wright, was killed within the Maze prison. We immediately asked Martin Narey to extend the scope of his inquiry to include the circumstances surrounding the murder.

4. In addition HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, Sir David Ramsbotham was asked immediately to bring forward a full inspection of the Maze.

5. Martin Narey's detailed and comprehensive report is now before the House. I am grateful to him and his team for completing his inquiry so promptly.

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6. Before going on to consider important aspects of the report, I would like to comment on the third serious incident that has occurred in the Maze - the brutal and savage murder of David Keys who was found dead in LVF accommodation on the morning of Sunday, 15 March.

7. I very much regret any incident which leads to the loss of life within prison. I am committed to taking all reasonable steps to prevent a recurrence. But I must say emphatically even with the most rigorous and severe prison regimes it is impossible to guarantee that serious incidents will not happen.

8. Mr Keys' murder is of course the subject of an RUC investigation and an internal investigation by the Prison Service. However, although Martin Narey had the safety of prisoners continually in mind, the murder raises issues that go beyond the scope of Martin Narey's inquiry. I have therefore asked Sir David Ramsbotham, whose inspection of the Maze began on Monday, 23 March to look specifically at the way in which the regime at the Maze impacts on the safety of individual prisoners and to make recommendations.

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9. As a result of information received during the RUC's investigation, the Governor has decided to place LVF prisoners under Prison Rule 32 for the maintenance of good order and discipline. This is not a punishment but does mean that prisoners are kept in cell for up to 23 hours of the day and have restricted association and privileges. Even this reasonable measure resulted in a number of prisoners refusing prison food, and threats to prison staff, in an effort to overturn the Governor's decision.

10. It is important to bear in mind that Mr Keys applied to be transferred to the Maze in full knowledge of the conditions there. However, in future remand prisoners will not move immediately to the Maze but will be held for a longer period in Maghaberry for assessment. This will give the prison authorities more time to be assured about the safety of such a move.

11. Madam Speaker, Martin Narey has described very fully the unique difficulties faced by staff and management at the Maze prison. To quote from his report:

"The Maze contains more than 500 paramilitary prisoners, from five different factions, some violently opposed to one another, living in segregated accommodation and enjoying the support of significant communities outside the prison.

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It is staffed by prison officers who live in the same communities."

12. Madam Speaker, staff at all levels in the Prison Service and their families have been subjected to a campaign of intimidation and attack directed against them. Since the start of the troubles, 29 members of staff have been murdered by paramilitaries. In 1996/97 alone, there were 122 reported threats against staff and a further 50 officers had to be given special protection. This campaign has been waged against staff in an effort by prisoners and their supporters to impose their will. The campaign continues. Last weekend there was a live bomb attempt on the home of a female prison officer in Portadown and in the early hours of Monday morning a bomb exploded under the car of a retired prison officer living in Carrickfergus.

13. Given the small size of Northern Ireland and its small prison estate, the dispersal of paramilitary prisoners is not possible. Instead the only prudent option is to hold them in one place. Although the concentration of prisoners has many security advantages, there is a price to be paid. It gives the prisoners the opportunity to take concerted action within prison, including against staff.

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14. I know of no other prison which operates under such difficult circumstances, nor where staff are under such continual threat and pressure.

15. I share Martin Narey's admiration for those who work at the Maze. Despite the difficulties and dangers, for 14 years until December of last year they had contained a difficult population without a single escape.

16. Martin Narey has also drawn attention to the support which paramilitary prisoners have outside prison. One important consequence of this has been faced by me and my predecessors. This is the danger that actions taken inside prison for perfectly sound and defensible penological reasons, may result in disruption and unrest outside prison. Against this background, I am aware that staff and management at the Maze have created conditions of safety and humanity which compare favourably with any other prison in this country and beyond and have been entirely open to impartial observers from outside such as the International Committee of the Red Cross.

17. In the aftermath of the escape and the murders I am required to make decisions about the security of prisons

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and prisoners. But like all my predecessors I must make decisions which balance the security of custody with the safety of our staff. I must also make decisions which balance the requirements of imprisonment with the wider requirements of public order and public safety.

18. In fact this Government has already taken significant steps to improve security at the Maze prison. In March 1997 a tunnel was found in H Block 7. It was the subject of an inquiry carried out by John Steele in the Northern Ireland Office. Following the election of this Government we have pursued the implementation of the Steele recommendations. Specifically:

- morning and evening headcounts are being taken;
- each day five randomly selected cells per block are being given a fabric check;
- full block searches are now a weekly feature, one block being searched each Thursday;
- material coming from stores is now exchanged on a "new for old" basis. There is now an accurate picture of the amount and nature of these supplies in the blocks;
- shadow-boards are now in place in each block for

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handicraft tools and excess tools are removed during searches;

- all prisoners on inter-block movement are being searched.

In addition, there is a programme of physical security measures which has been included in the existing block refurbishment programme. Five blocks have been up-graded to date and work on the remainder is due for completion by mid-August.

19. Madam Speaker, Martin Narey has drawn attention to a number of important lapses of security at the Maze. He has made 59 recommendations which he considers will represent real improvements for staff and prisoners.

20. As Martin Narey indicated in his report, changes have already been made. In particular, the Governor has taken the initiative to put in place:

- Regular full Block searches on random basis;
- Regular security checks of all H-Blocks fences;
- New arrangements for weekend coverage of staffing shortfalls on visits;
- New arrangements for searching prisoners on visits; and for x-raying their parcels;

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- New arrangements for counting visitors at parties.

21. As to the remaining recommendations, there are others that will be taken forward immediately, now that the report has been published. Other recommendations require an element of detailed consideration and the necessary project teams are being put in place, for instance - to look at security of the roofs of the buildings and improved processes for dealing with visitors.

22. The issues to be considered vary in their complexity. However as an assurance of our determination to act upon the recommendations and to tighten security, I undertake to make available to Parliament in three months time a progress report on implementation. In addition, and going beyond the recommendations, we have set up a security audit team which will begin to work immediately and which will provide the Chief Executive of the Prison Service with the necessary assurance that changes have been made and are working effectively.

23. Finally, I would like to turn to questions about the on-going management of the Maze. Martin Narey has recorded not only a number of lapses in security but has also dealt with wider matters to do with the safe and secure running of the prison. These centre on improving the

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quality of general management and enhancing staff morale and confidence.

24. The report suggests that the short-comings cannot be attributed to individuals but are instead the result of a slow but long-running deterioration caused by staff fears of the consequences of managing paramilitary prisoners and by the absence of effective middle management.

25. The short-comings have also emerged because there is no easy way of dealing with the Maze and the difficult prisoners that it contains. The simple truth that Martin Narey acknowledges is that the Maze is different and the policies operated by successive Governments - and that we have inherited -have reflected this fact.

26. In theory the option exists to turn the clock back at the Maze and to reassert the sort of regime which operated during the 1980s. However turning the clock back would be at a price within the prison and within the community that I believe no reasonable person would be prepared to pay. Certainly no previous Government has taken a different view.

27. We recognise the problems but that is not an excuse for complacency. One irony is that the short-comings noted

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by Martin Narey had been noted by the Prison Service long before December of last year and were being acted on. They were the reason that Martin Mogg, the most senior governor available within the Northern Ireland Prison Service, together with a new management team was asked in October 1997 to take over the Maze. Martin Mogg's appointment is a temporary one, to ensure the vigorous implementation of the Steele recommendations. I am pleased to note Martin Narey's acknowledgement of the good progress which the team has been making.

28. However, the fact remains as Martin Narey has concluded, "the challenge of the Maze is greater than that of any other establishment in the United Kingdom". I regard it as critically important, therefore, that we act quickly on the Narey inquiry recommendations. And we will do so.

29. Madam Speaker, implementing the Narey report in full will be a considerable task for to the Northern Ireland Prison Service. However, I am confident that it can and will meet this challenge. I commend this report to the House.

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