



Northern Ireland Office

Press Notice

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Stormont Castle
1 August 1978

NIO/8/1

COMMENT BY NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE SPOKESMAN ON ARCHBISHOP O'FIAICH'S STATEMENT

The Government are most surprised that Archbishop O'Fiaich's lengthy statement about his visit to HM Maze Prison makes no reference to the essential fact that it is the prisoners themselves who have made conditions what they are.

These criminals are totally responsible for the situation in which they find themselves. It is they who have been smearing excreta on the walls and pouring urine through cell doors. It is they who by their actions are denying themselves the excellent modern facilities of the prison. It is they, and they alone, who are creating bad conditions out of very good conditions.

Each and every prisoner has been tried under the judicial system established in Northern Ireland by Parliament. Those found guilty after the due process of law, if they are sent to prison by the courts, serve their sentences for what they are - convicted criminals. They are not political prisoners; more than 80 have been convicted of murder or attempted murder, and more than 80 of explosives offences. They are members of organisations which are responsible for the deaths of hundreds of innocent people, the maiming of thousands more, and the torture by kneecapping of over 600 of their own people.

All prisoners including those who are protesting are entitled to monthly visits, normal meals, to use the toilets, medical facilities and daily exercise. Simply by observing the rules, which are an essential requirement if good prison administration is to be maintained, these protesting prisoners would immediately have all furniture, books and magazines returned to the cells (indeed they were only removed because they were being broken or fouled by the prisoners themselves) and be able to watch TV, listen to the radio and continue with their hobbies, handicrafts and

recreation. These facilities are better than those available in most prisons in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The medical and public health aspects have been closely watched. All prisoners in Blocks H3, 4 and 5 have been moved during the last two months so that their dirty cells could be thoroughly cleaned and renovated. Most prisoners have dirtied their cells again once they were returned to them. But in the interests of prisoners this cleaning programme will continue.

The Northern Ireland Office receives daily reports from the doctors at the prison. Every protestor who reports sick is seen by a doctor without delay, and to date no prisoner has been found to be suffering from any form of illness, physical or mental, major or minor, attributable to the protest.

This protest action is the basis of a propaganda campaign which has been mounted by the IRA. It has been roundly condemned north and south of the Border. Not surprisingly there have been allegations made to the Archbishop about ill-treatment of prisoners by prison staff. There is no truth in these allegations and prison officers know that any such complaints by prisoners are thoroughly and promptly investigated and, if substantiated, lead to disciplinary action. Indeed only recently the work of the prison Governor and his staff, in the difficult conditions in these three cell blocks, was commended by the prison's independent Board of Visitors, the members of which are drawn from both sides of the community. The Board has access to all parts of the prison and the Chairman pays frequent visits to the protestors' cell blocks.

It is not the Government's wish that the protesting prisoners should continue to put up with their present conditions. But the prisoners and those who influence them should realise that the Government will stand firm on its policy on special category status. No one who is convicted of a crime carried out after 1 March 1976 - and that includes those involved in the "dirty" protest - will be given any form of special status. As soon as this decision is understood and accepted conditions in the cell blocks can return to normal.