

The dirty protest continues in four of the eight cell-blocks at Maze Prison. 350+ Republican prisoners convicted of offences committed after 1 March 1976 are refusing to work, wear prison clothes, take exercise, use the toilets or clean their cells.

2. On 18 January a delegation of three MPs, one from each of the main political parties, visited the H blocks at Maze. Mr Concannon announced on 1 February in reply to a written Question that he had decided to resume the former arrangements (temporarily suspended in July 1978) for MPs to make annual general interest visits to Maze. He added that he was keeping under review whether there was scope for visits to the prison on a wider basis.

3. The cleaning operations in the dirty blocks have been stepped up and each cell is now being cleaned every 2 weeks - in some cases after an even shorter period.

4. The Government is determined to maintain its policy of ending special category status. Convicted criminals will be housed in cellular accommodation and subject to the normal prison regime. Protesters are dealt with under Prison Rules for refusing to work or wear prison clothes. Punishment must continue, if only in the interests of conforming prisoners. The punishments (loss of remission and privileges) are not disproportionate, and they cease as soon as prisoners conform. In addition to the 350+ dirty protesters there are 11 clean protesters at Maze (there are also 33 Women at Armagh refusing to work); these figures compare with well over 700 conforming prisoners at Maze who benefit from the many facilities available.

5. In addition to the statutory monthly visits and letters, and the weekly visits by medical officers, protesters have contact with the outside world, for example through priests and welfare officers. Arrangements have recently been made for the protesting prisoners to have easy access, in the wings of the cell-blocks, to books and newspapers; but these facilities are not being used.

6. Mr O'Kennedy's Interest

Speaking at a Fianna Fail meeting on 6 January, Mr O'Kennedy said that he hoped "a speedy and humane solution can be found which will put an end to the senseless suffering being endured" by the protesters at Maze. He went on to refer to the protesters as children of the present troubles who are exploited by the terrorist leadership for propaganda purposes. In the Dail on 1 February Mr O'Kennedy answered a Question about the protesters removed to outside hospital (see below).

7. Mr Concannon's meeting with Dr Eamon Kennedy on 1 February

At this meeting Dr Kennedy raised a number of issues related to the protest and referred to Mr Blaney's Question in the Dail about three protesting prisoners who had been transferred to outside hospital (we now find that only two of these prisoners were protesters). Mr Concannon said that a way would be found for keeping Dublin in touch with the facts of hospital cases; we have since informed the Irish Authorities through FCO and the British Embassy that we will let them know of any significant incidents which seem likely material for propaganda, including cases where prisoners are taken to hospital other than for routine tests or for minor attention of an uncontroversial nature. We have made it plain to the Irish that while we evidently have no

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obligation to do this, we recognise that there may be mutual advantages to us both in their being aware of the facts at an early stage, so that they can co-operate in getting them into perspective if questions are asked about them.

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