

536/KG

NOTE FOR THE RECORDVISIT OF FR MAGEE, PAPAL REPRESENTATIVE, TO THE MAZE

Mr Blaker, Minister of State (FCO) and Mr Alison met Fr Magee at London Airport when he was enroute from Rome this afternoon. The meeting lasted about 45 minutes. Archbishop Heim, a Chaplain, and I, were also present.

2. Fr Magee explained that his was a goodwill mission from the Pope, with the object of trying to defuse the violence that would erupt in NI if Mr Sands died. He hoped to talk to as many people as possible in NI, but wanted to begin with a meeting with an NIO Minister, in the hope of receiving a message that he could deliver to Mr Sands that would provide a basis for securing time within which to make further explorations. By this, presumably, he meant that if he had the means of persuading Mr Sands to cease his hunger strike, he could then discuss ways ahead with various people.

3. Mr Alison recalled the Pope's visit to Ireland last year, and reiterated HMG's desire to prevent violence. He explained that the strikers' aim was political status, embodied in a special prison regime. This HMG could not grant. The prison regime in NI was a liberal one, and ~~that~~ there might be scope for further development; but ^{must} this ~~might~~ stop short of handing over control to inmates. Nor could we differentiate among classes of prisoners. The best hope of avoiding violence lay in Mr Sands ending his fast.

4. Fr Magee then referred to "peripheral areas" where there might be scope for flexibility, for example prison clothing and work. There ensued a detailed explanation of the clothing regime, on which Fr Magee appeared to be well briefed. He pressed the point that to offer all prisoners the option of wearing their own clothes all the time might be a gesture of goodwill that might make a difference in the present situation. Mr Alison explained that such a change was desired by the protesters ^{not} for its own sake but as a symbol of a concession on political status. Nor had we any reason to suppose that any one change of that kind would make a difference to Mr Sands's position.

5. Fr Magee picked up the references to the possibility of further developments on the prison regime and asked if this was something that he could hold out to Mr Sands as a future hope. Mr Alison said that it would be wrong for Mr Sands to expect any specific and immediate change in regime, and Fr Magee was also reminded that ambiguities in this respect at the end of the last prison strike had caused future troubles.

6. In leaving Fr Magee said that later in his visit he might ask to see the Secretary of State, and he was given the impression that this could be arranged.

7. The press knew of his arrival and were around the VIP lounge. Fr Magee did not seem anxious to talk to them, and they were told by Ministers and officials that Ministers had come to meet Fr Magee as a courtesy, that the reason for his visit had naturally come up

E.R.

[Redacted]

in conversation, and no details were being disclosed.

MJR

M J MORIARTY

28 April 1981