



Northern Ireland Information Service

Stormont Castle,
Belfast BT4 3ST
Telephone Belfast 63011
Telex 74163: 74250: 74272

Great George Street,
London SW1P 3AJ
Telephone 01-233-4626
Telex 1918889

Ulster Office,
11 Berkeley Street, London W1
Telephone 01-493-0601
Telex 21839

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*Mr. Home
- PIA on file
Enquiry
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MAZE PRISON ESCAPE -
STATEMENT IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS BY THE SECRETARY OF
STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND, THE RT HON JAMES PRIOR MP

I shall, with permission Mr Speaker, take this earliest possible opportunity to make a statement to the House on the escape from the Maze prison in Northern Ireland last month and on the action taken since then.

On 25 September at approximately 2.45 pm a number of Republican prisoners produced guns in H Block 7 of the Maze Prison. They overpowered prison officers and shot the officer in the block's central control room in the head. They put on the officers' uniforms. About an hour later, still in control of the block, prisoners took over a meal delivery van on its arrival, and the prison officer driver was forced at gunpoint to drive 38 of the prisoners to the main gate of the prison. On the way the van passed through two manned gates without being searched. At the main gate the prisoners disembarked and a fight with prison staff ensued during which a number of prison officers received serious injuries and a prison officer was stabbed to death. I deeply regret his death, and know the whole House will join me in extending sympathy to his family. The prisoners opened the main gate but the exit was immediately blocked by a prison officer's car. The 38 prisoners then sought to escape on foot and were chased by prison officers. As a number of the escaping prisoners were wearing prison officers' uniform and some of the prison officers were in civilian clothes, the Army sentry in the tower at the main gate could not clearly identify

which individuals were prison officers and which were prisoners. He did however open fire and wound one escaping prisoner whom he had seen shoot a pursuing prison officer in the leg. Ten prisoners were quickly apprehended and returned to the prison. Immediately the alarm was given the RUC and the army instituted very extensive arrangements both in the immediate vicinity of the prison and more widely throughout the Province.

Immediate contact was established with the authorities in the Republic of Ireland who readily gave their full co-operation. Within the next few days a further nine escapers were recaptured, leaving 19 still unlawfully at large. The search for them continues unremittingly.

On the day following the escape, with the agreement of my Rt Hon Friend the Home Secretary, I invited Sir James Hennessy, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons, to conduct an inquiry into security arrangements at HM Prison, Maze, bearing on the escape on Sunday 25 September; to make relevant recommendations for the improvement of security at the prison; and to report to me as soon as possible.

Sir James is aided in his inquiry by a full team of Inspectors and by other staff of HM Inspectorate of Prisons, numbering 10 in all. It is not yet possible to say when the report will be completed. The House will understand that the arrangements at the Maze are inevitably complex and there are a great many witnesses to be interviewed, some of whom are still recovering from injuries. However, I know that Sir James and his team are pursuing the task with urgency as well as with a view to its being as thorough and searching as it can be.

When the report is complete it is my intention to make public as full an account as possible of the matter consistent with the future security of the prison.

In parallel with the start of Sir James' inquiry, all governors of prisons in Northern Ireland immediately undertook urgent reviews of their security systems and procedures. Both in the Maze prison and elsewhere there has been additional searching of prisoners, cells, prison workshops and other areas. The Royal Ulster Constabulary

and the Army have assisted in searching prisons in line with long established procedures. Certain additional physical security measures are being implemented, including the provision of protective screens for the control rooms of each H block in the Maze Prison; and a more secure electronic locking system has been fitted to the main gate on a trial basis, which if found satisfactory will be linked to a specially constructed bullet proof control post. Other security measures are also being taken.

The escape of so many prisoners and the killing of a prison officer represents a setback to law enforcement in Northern Ireland, at a time when terrorist organisations have been under increasing pressure. We are dealing with determined and violent men and there can be no let-up in the measures that we are taking.

The escape also adds to the already considerable difficulties in managing the prisons in Northern Ireland. I am anxious, in reporting to the House today, to indicate what action has been taken since the escape as well as to outline the facts of the incident as far as they can be established in advance of the Hennessy report. The House can be assured that we shall do everything possible to identify why things went wrong on 25 September, and shall take all appropriate steps in the light of those findings.