

SUMMARY OF REPORT ON THE WELFARE NEEDS AND MAJOR AREAS OF CONCERN
FOR IRISH PRISONERS OVERSEAS AND THEIR FAMILIES IN IRELAND

Presented to: IRISH EPISCOPAL COMMISSION FOR EMIGRANTS

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BACKGROUND

In response to concern expressed by the Cardinal, members of the hierarchy, members of the Irish Chaplaincy in Britain and by prisoners themselves and their families, and taking into account the concern about prisoners' welfare expressed by Pope John Paul II during his visit to Ireland, the Irish Episcopal Commission for Emigrants has undertaken to investigate and respond to the needs of Irish prisoners overseas and their families in Ireland.

In working towards fulfilling this commitment, a small voluntary group known as the Irish Commission for Prisoners Overseas (ICPO) has come together under the auspices of I.E.C.E. to identify and consider appropriate responses in Ireland to the particular needs of Irish prisoners overseas and their families here. The group, with I.E.C.E. staff assistance, is already helping some prisoners - as far away as Chile - and their relatives (See Appendix I for ICPO members).

For the purposes of the work of ICPO and this Report, Irish prisoners overseas are taken to mean Irish nationals in prison outside of Ireland. The focus of attention on overseas prisoners families resident in Ireland does not preclude concern about Irish prisoners and their families domiciled overseas (some already being helped by the Irish Chaplaincy Scheme in England).

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THE REPORT

During the Summer of 1984 I.E.C.E. commissioned a limited research project to assist ICPO:

- 1) Compile a case study analysis as a means of extending its factual knowledge of the experiences of families in Ireland of prisoners overseas in order to better clarify:
 - (a) the main welfare concerns of the families;
 - (b) matters of concern for the prisoners overseas which might require responses in Ireland;
 - (c) appropriate responses, including appropriate Church responses, in view of the extent and nature of needs expressed.

- 2) As the families interviewed might have difficulties related to their positions, a secondary objective of assisting families with immediate problems or referring them to appropriate agencies was decided on.

It was decided that the research would consist of identifying and carrying out interviews with overseas prisoners' families, initially in the 26 counties. Interviews were carried out with a cross-section of twenty prisoners' families from urban and rural areas, whose relatives are detained for a variety of offences, including some 'political', in Britain and elsewhere. Consultations were held also with a variety of officials concerned with Irish prisoners overseas, and with groups concerned about prisoners in Ireland and Britain.

MAIN ISSUES RAISED

(Please see Appendix III for three sample casestudies which place these issues in context)

1. THE FAMILIES

- (i) All families visited requested further assistance either with welfare problems associated with their positions or with matters of concern regarding their relatives in prison, i.e. sudden difficulties with visits

Cont/... (3)

MAIN ISSUES RAISED: THE FAMILIES (Cont/..)

.. or conflicting advice from solicitors, embassies and consulates. Some requested assistance with matters indirectly related to their positions, i.e. a widowed mother asked for help finding a job for her remaining and only supporting son. Over half of them referred other families to the researcher.

- (ii) All families felt particularly vulnerable, isolated and unaware of where support might be found when they first heard of their relatives arrest and/or conviction. Some heard via newspapers and television. Others were closely questioned by Irish Gardai who offered no explanation about their relatives. The shock for one father seems directly connected to his death two weeks later. There are indications also that the immediate pre and post release periods will be very difficult, especially where political views vary or the prisoner's crime, e.g. rape, is difficult for the family.
- (iii) All families experienced considerable difficulty (in some cases financial) in arranging first and sometimes subsequent visits. The discretionary visiting allowances available for hardship cases via the Health Boards were viewed as demeaning and too small, by the few who had ever heard of them.
- (iv) Families expressed feelings of isolation, frustration in dealing with officialdom, and helplessness, particularly when relatives were imprisoned in non-English speaking countries.
- (v) All had been unaware of where to turn for help and would welcome support provided it goes beyond "grand words" from a Church-based group such as ICPO.

Cont/.. (4)

2. THE PRISONERS

- (i) All families stressed that they and their relatives in prison abroad were most anxious for the repatriation of prisoners to serve their sentences in Irish jails or, at a minimum, to secure transferral from Britain to Northern Ireland in order to facilitate visiting and family contact.
- (ii) Irish prisoners serving long sentences in distant places, e.g. 30 years in Bangkok, need special attention. Particular need was expressed for a service which would guarantee the arrival of letters and parcels, and also for a visiting service (which could perhaps be organised through Irish missionaries).
- (iii) There are indications - which need further investigation - of close co-operation between police authorities internationally in order to secure convictions, including implication without explanation of prisoners' families. Allegations that an unjustified IRA tag can help secure a British jury conviction seem founded in at least one case.
- (iv) Short and restricted visits, where visits are often only feasible on an annual basis, are experienced by prisoners and their families as frustrating and possibly detrimental to family ties. In the case of the 'political' prisoners family contact and prisoners psychological welfare are severely strained, it was felt, by the constant moving between prisons of those in the Category A high security dispersal system.

3. GENERAL

- (i) In order to identify a wide range of respondents it was necessary for ICPO to declare its existence and on-going concern for prisoners and their families.

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GENERAL (Cont/..)

- (ii) Contacts made and credibility established through the research has increased the number and complexity of requests to ICPO which are far beyond the work-load of a voluntary group.
- (iii) The work of Sr. Sarah Clarke in London is held in high regard by the families of prisoners in Britain and Ireland to whom she is known.

OUTLINE CONCLUSIONS

1. The isolation, and breakdown of family ties and contact, experienced by prisoners and their families is multiplied in the case of prisoners overseas.
2. The welfare concerns identified through the research are serious and complex; they require a response that is professional, confidential, consistent and caring. This response includes the difficult and sensitive task of making and developing contacts with prisoners and their families.
3. The issues presented which were of universal concern, i.e. repatriation, demand considerable further work to ensure that any response is well documented, backed up by international data and well thought out. A number of other issues, i.e. the practice of deporting Irish prisoners from Britain at the end of their sentence, irrespective of their families' domicile; and the particular needs of women prisoners and traveller prisoners and their families also require further research.
4. The follow up from the research and ensuing referrals has put an inevitable strain on the voluntary members of ICPO, the staff of I.E.C.E. and the researcher. Current resources could not be further stretched.

Cont/.. (6)

OUTLINE CONCLUSIONS (Cont/..)

5. There are indications that, as the recent requests to ICPO show, the full extent of the problems are but emerging and will continue to emerge from the research and contacts made over the past few months. Irish prisoners overseas do not always declare or are not allowed declare their nationality and do not always contact their families in Ireland. (See Appendix II for known Irish prisoners in British jails).
6. The particular needs of Irish prisoners overseas and their families in Ireland are not being addressed directly or in a co-ordinated way by any group or organisation.
7. A Church response as part of a commitment to Irish emigrants abroad would:
 - (a) address a need not already being met by any group or organisation;
 - (b) appear to be welcomed by all concerned.
8. In terms of resources to deal with the above issues and needs I conclude that at least one full-time professional person with back-up secretarial facilities is required to:
 - (a) offer support and assistance to the families;
 - (b) do background research on the issues and problems raised;
 - (c) establish a data bank of information regarding penal systems, laws and regulations and international contacts;
 - (d) stimulate awareness regarding prisoners overseas and help develop local support networks for the families, since local Church involvement would be a crucial element in any Church response;
 - (e) liaise and develop links with relevant statutory and voluntary bodies.

Cont/..(7)

OUTLINE CONCLUSIONS (Cont/..)

9. I suggest that since ICPO is already in existence under the auspices of I.E.C.E. and with a membership skilled in the issues concerned, that ICPO, subject to I.E.C.E. approval of its members and objectives, act as a support/line management for this professional worker under the overall guidance of the I.E.C.E.

To carry out this work well:

- (a) ICPO needs to become better known;
- (b) Close links need to be developed with Church people who work for prisoners and their families in the North, since a number of the issues involved, e.g. repatriation and deportation, have crucial Northern dimensions, and have long been matters of concern for them;
- (c) Links with the Irish Chaplaincy Scheme work on behalf of Irish prisoners in Britain need to be extended.

Anastasia Crickley.

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October 1984

APPENDIX I

Rev. P.J. Byrne
Secretary, Episcopal Commission for Emigrants for seven years
following a period of four years as a member of the Irish
Chaplaincy in Britain

Stasia Crickley
Lecturer, Dept. Social Studies, Maynooth College. Previously
social worker at the Irish Centre, Camden Town and member of
the Prison Studies Group.

Mary McAleese
Professor of Law, Trinity College. Background of interest in
prisoners welfare and rights. Has a special interest in the
legal and international aspects of this topic.

Rev. John O'Connell, SSC
Justice and Peace co-ordinator for the Columbans in Ireland and
Britain. Worked with prisoners during his time in the Philippines.

Breda Slattery
Secretary, Emigrant Welfare Bureau, a Dublin Diocesan counselling
and advisory service.

Rev. Breifne Walker, CSSP
Previously chaplain at Mountjoy. Now completing a study of
violence and religion in Northern Ireland

APPENDIX II

Known Irish prisoners in British prisons on 3 .4.84:

750	Southern prisoners)	Total of 1,061 known prisoners
311	Northern prisoners		

Of this total 57 persons are Category A high security prisoners.

The above figures were supplied by the British Foreign Office to
the Irish Embassy, London.

Further breakdowns in age, sex, length of sentence and nature or
category of offence/conviction have been requested urgently through
official channels and will be conveyed to ICPO as soon as they
become available.