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REPORT ON THE ESCAPE FROM
HM PRISON, BELFAST ON 10 JUNE 1981

The following is the text of a statement by Mr Michael Alison, MP, Minister of State,
Northern Ireland Office:

On 11 June 1981, the Secretary of State asked Mr William H Pearce CBE, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, to conduct an inquiry into those aspects of the security arrangements at HM Prison, Belfast, relevant to the escape of 8 prisoners on 10 June. Mr Pearce's report has now been received.

Because of the detailed references to security measures at Belfast Prison in the report it is not proposed to publish it.

The main conclusion of Mr Pearce's report was that the escape resulted both from failure of the security system and from human error. He specifically referred to the lack of adequate and precise written guidance and instructions on security matters at all levels both within the prison, from the Governor to officers, and outside, from the Northern Ireland Office to prison staff, as well as insufficiently rigorous application of the existing security procedures by staff in the prison. Mr Pearce has made a number of recommendations to rectify these deficiencies.

On the most serious issue which was the acquisition of firearms by prisoners, the inquiry did not establish with certainty the route the weapons took but recommendations intended substantially to improve the security precautions against the introduction of firearms, including more rigorous searching procedures for professional visitors, have been made.

The report also concluded that while there was a collective failure by staff of all grades to apply existing security procedures with the fullest rigour, neither the Governor nor any other individual member of staff at Belfast Prison was held to be particularly at fault. Accordingly no disciplinary action will be taken against any individual member of staff in connection with the escape itself. Indeed, the report commended the courage of unarmed members of staff who by their individual actions during the escape reflected great credit upon the Prison Service as a whole.

The report and its recommendations are now being given close and urgent study and a number of the recommendations are being, or have been, implemented already.