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## Minister rejects 'poor judgment' allegation

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Bernadette Sands McKeivitt wrote letter of complaint to Mr Ahern

Photograph: The Irish Times

CONOR LALLY

MINISTER FOR Justice Dermot Ahern has defended himself against allegations that he used poor judgment when he was contacted by the family of Real IRA leader Michael McKeivitt with complaints about his conditions in prison.

Mr Ahern added he would not be apologising to the families of those killed by the Real IRA bomb in Omagh in 1998 because he had done nothing wrong.

"Anyone who knows me in public life for 22 years as a TD and before that as a councillor knows there is virtually nobody who has opposed paramilitary violence more than I have," he said.

Mr Ahern was speaking publicly for the first since a Sunday newspaper published e-mails from McKeivitt's wife, Bernadette Sands McKeivitt, to Mr Ahern.

In the e-mails, which were obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, she complained her husband had been denied visits and compassionate release for his mother's funeral because he was engaged in a protest at Portlaoise Prison, where he is serving 20 years for directing terrorism.

Mr Ahern said while he passed the e-mails on to the then minister for justice Michael McDowell, he did not suggest any course of action to Mr McDowell or make any representation on McKeivitt's behalf.

Mr Ahern said that as a public representative he was duty bound to have "compassion and empathy" when the family of an inmate came to him in a distressed state.

The Minister said that had handled many similar "difficult cases" in the past.

He said that he had always asked people to put their concerns in writing so he could pass them on to the relevant authority.

In the case of McKeivitt, his protest had ended and he had been returned to the normal prison regime by the time Mr McDowell replied to Mr Ahern in July 2004.

The Omagh Victims' Families group said Mr Ahern had used "bad judgment" and called on him to resign.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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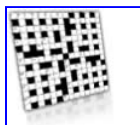
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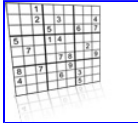
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