

## NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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# Northern Ireland Office

## Press Notice

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Stormont Castle, Belfast

30 October 1974

STATEMENT IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS TODAY BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND, MR MERLYN REES MP, ON RECENT PRISON RIOTS:

I will, with permission, make a statement on the prison disturbances which occurred in Northern Ireland on the 15th and 16th of October. In view of the gravity of the events, I thought it right to take the earliest opportunity to report to the House.

Disturbances occurred at the four main prisons - Maze, Crumlin Road, Magilligan and Armagh - and involved prisoners, persons on remand and detainees. I should add that, of 2,700 persons in prisons in Northern Ireland, approximately 500 are detainees.

On the evening of Tuesday, 15 October, a small group of convicted Republican prisoners in the Maze Prison seized and assaulted a number of prison officers; soon after, the prisoners began to engage in widespread destruction in the Prison. Buildings were ransacked, looted and set on fire; 18 of the 21 compounds were destroyed or seriously damaged, as were the Prison hospital, the new kitchen, the shop, the visitors' reception buildings and internal towers. An early attempt was made to storm the main gate, but this was repulsed by prison officers who also rescued from the cell block 4 prisoners who were in danger of being burnt to death. At the Governor's request, an Army detachment entered the Prison to secure the main gate and took over the adjoining administrative area from which the prison staff were then withdrawn. The Army detachment used baton rounds to repel further attacks, also, with my approval, a limited amount of CS gas.

Strong Army reinforcements were sent to the area during the night and the outside perimeter was secured. As soon as it was light on the next day, the Army moved into the Prison in strength to restore order. Rather more than 200 Republican detainees who had remained in their compounds offered no resistance, but the remainder of the

Republican detainees, together with Republican prisoners, concentrated at the opposite end of the Prison, armed with a variety of weapons, including sharpened lengths of timber, steel piping, knives and iron bed legs. When an attempt was made to disarm them, a vicious battle ensued with the Army. CS gas and baton rounds had to be used before order could be restored. Loyalist prisoners and detainees were not involved in this engagement.

As soon as the riot began, all medical services stood by, and casualty details were published as they became available in the course of the day in order to dispel grossly exaggerated and alarmist rumours. Over 300 prisoners claimed to be hurt but after examination by prison doctors, only a small number were taken to hospital for further examination; only 9 were admitted as hospital cases, 3 of whom have since been discharged. Altogether 14 Prison Officers were injured; 4 were admitted for hospital treatment, and all of these have been discharged. 23 soldiers were injured; 16 were sent to hospital, but none was admitted as a hospital patient.

Trouble spread to other prisons during the day. At Armagh women's prison, the Governor and three female officers were seized as hostages when the prisoners heard rumours of death and serious injury to prisoners at the Maze. Fourteen hours later, the prisoners released the hostages unharmed after two chaplains had persuaded them that these rumours were unfounded. There were no injuries. In Crumlin Road Prison, Republicans on remand barricaded themselves on two floors during the afternoon of Wednesday, 16 October; there was considerable damage, but order was restored by troops in support of the prison staff with the aid of CS gas and baton rounds. There was considerable resistance and some 131 prisoners received injuries, mostly minor. 10 were taken to hospital for examination but all were returned.

At Magilligan Prison some Republican convicted prisoners burnt the kitchen, part of the hospital, and a number of other huts. Order was restored by the prison officers. There were no injuries involving prisoners, but three prison officers received minor injuries.

A preliminary estimate suggests that the cost of repairing the damage done at the Maze Prison will be approximately £1½ m; at Magilligan Prison £200,000; and at Crumlin Road considerably less.

During the night of 15/16 October, I gave orders that repair work should start at the Maze immediately the riot was contained. Protective sheeting was provided to render habitable some of the accommodation huts which had not been totally destroyed;

field kitchens and mobile sanitary units were also brought in, and temporary repairs carried out to the hospital. Prisoners were given blankets and palliasses.

Restoration work at the Maze is now proceeding, and pressure on accommodation there has been eased by the transfer of just over 100 convicted prisoners to Magilligan Prison. Visiting facilities and food parcels are being restored to a limited extent and will be extended as restoration work proceeds.

I have, with the agreement of my right hon Friend, the Home Secretary, asked the retiring Chief Inspector of Prisons at the Home Office to examine the outbreak and circumstances of the violent disturbances at the Maze and to report to me as soon as possible. Given the nature of the enquiry, the report will be confidential, but I shall, when the report is received, make a statement to the House. 7

I should like to pay tribute to the courage and restraint shown by the Prison Officers and the members of the armed services who had to withstand vicious assaults during the riots themselves and in restoring order subsequently. About 1,000 prisoners took part in the disturbances at the Maze, and in the circumstances it is remarkable that there were so few casualties.