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SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND

16 October 1978

Michael O'Kennedy Esq
Minister for Foreign Affairs
Republic of Ireland

Dear Michael,

In the course of our discussion during my recent visit to Dublin, I undertook to write to you about the regime in the Maze for the prisoners protesting against the refusal to grant them special category status, and especially about our programme of cleaning the cells.

The protest action against the Government's decision to end special category status began in September 1976, when the first prisoners were sentenced for offences committed after 1 March 1976. It was then that a number of prisoners started to refuse to work or to wear prison clothing. This action is a breach of the Prison Rules (Northern Ireland) 1954, and all the prisoners concerned have been dealt with under the disciplinary procedures laid down in the Rules. The disciplinary awards made against the protesting prisoners include loss of remission, generally a day for each day of protesting, and loss of privileges. This means, for example, that the prisoners are not allowed privilege visits, newspapers, radios or parcels.

The prisoners protesting by refusing to work or to wear prison clothing are still allowed their statutory monthly visits, normal meals, to use the toilets, and normal medical facilities. Exercise is available, as required by the Prison Rules, provided that the prisoners put on prison clothes to take it (or, in suitable weather conditions, they may exercise in prison underwear or naked). It is the prisoners' own choice not to take exercise in any of these ways.

The cell blocks at Maze Prison in which the protest is taking place have only recently been built and provide prison accommodation on a par with the best in Western Europe. Each block cost over £1,000,000. Good recreational facilities, including a £100,000 sports hall and two all-weather sports pitches, have been specially provided for the use of the inmates in the cellular prison. Each block also has its own classroom and library, and each wing has its own dining hall. The central heating system in the blocks maintain a minimum temperature of about 65°F.

Women prisoners in Northern Ireland are not required to wear prison clothing. The women prisoners in Armagh who are protesting against

the refusal of special category status are doing so by refusing to work. They are also being dealt with under the disciplinary procedures set out in the Prison Rules.

The "on the blanket" protest continued in much the same form until March this year. Since then rather more than 300 of the protesting prisoners in three of the eight H Blocks at Maze have intensified their protest by refusing to clean their cells, to use the toilets or empty their chamber pots. They have deliberately damaged the contents and fittings of their cells, and at one time they were pouring urine and excreta out into the corridors through the observation slots which they had broken. As a result the Governor of the prison was obliged to order the removal of beds and all other cell furniture which were in any case being destroyed or damaged by the prisoners; the prisoners are now sleeping on their mattresses. The corridors are no longer being fouled to the same extent, but this is only because the apertures in the doors have been modified by staff. Some of the protesting prisoners are still pouring their urine under the cell doors, throwing excreta out of their windows and smearing it on the windows, the window-frames and the outside walls. The protesting prisoners have broken all their windows; these are now being replaced using a tougher kind of glass.

The cells which the prisoners have been fouling are being systematically cleaned by prison staff using modern steam-cleaning equipment. Every cell is cleaned every 3-4 weeks, and we are hoping to improve on this. The prisoners are immediately dirtying the clean cells to which they are transferred.

The cleaner (Trade Name Karcher) is an oil-heated unit which delivers water or steam at high pressure and is similar to those used in garages for engine and chassis cleaning and as a pre-wash in automatic car washing bays. It also has a chamber which can be charged with detergent or any selected chemical.

The method of operation is as follows. The operator wields a lance emitting a jet of hot water or steam under pressure (it can be switched to cold water if desired). A number of cells are treated with hot water and detergent and left to soak for a short time. Then they are cleaned with hot water and steam, under pressure. Obviously this leaves large quantities of surface water intermixed with solid particles of dirt which are cleared by using a 'Tornado' suction drier. This machine can also be used as an industrial vacuum cleaner for the removal of dry dirt.

The Karcher cleaner and 'Tornado' drier with accessories, cost approximately £3,000. Both the cleaner and the drier are easily operated by a team of four men. If any of the people in the Department of Justice would like more information about this equipment, I suggest that they should get in touch with officials in the Prison Administration Division of the Northern Ireland Office in Dundonald House, who will be glad to help as far as they can.

The medical and public health aspects of the protest campaign are clearly of the greatest importance, and these are being closely watched. My officials keep in close touch with the doctors through the Chief Medical Officer at the Department of Health and Social Services, who is responsible for the prison medical service. Any protester who wants to do so can report sick in the ordinary way. So far no prisoner has been found to be suffering from any illness, physical or mental, other than a few minor skin conditions, attributable to the protest. The prisoners are being fed in their cells, and there is no evidence whatever that any prisoner is suffering from under-nutrition.

As would be expected, those who are encouraging the protesting prisoners from outside frequently allege that the prisoners are being systematically ill-treated by prison staff. In fact the Governor and the staff have acted with great restraint in the face of what on any view is a most provocative form of protest action. There is no doubt that one of the objectives of the current protest is to harass and provoke staff, but the prison officers - despite the murder in the course of the terrorist campaign of six of their colleagues and many other attacks - have continued to carry out their duties responsibly, and indeed with compassion and understanding, in spite of the unpleasant conditions which the prisoners are deliberately creating. The Governor would not condone rough treatment of prisoners, of whatever nature, by staff. Prison officers know that any complaints by prisoners of ill-treatment are thoroughly and promptly investigated, and if substantiated will lead to disciplinary action.

Like all prisons, Maze has an independent Board of Visitors, members of which are drawn from all sectors of the community. The Board has access to all parts of the prison and the Chairman, who pays frequent visits to the protesters' cell blocks, has written to Mr Concannon commending the work of the Governor and his staff in the face of the difficult conditions in the cell blocks where the protest is taking place.

That, then, is the background to the present situation. The declared objective of the protesting prisoners and those who support them has been, and remains, to secure the restoration of a form of special treatment for certain offences. The prisoners concerned, however, are in no sense political prisoners detained for what they believe; of those taking part in the "dirty" protest, more than 70 have been convicted of murder or attempted murder, and more than 80 of explosives offences.

What we in Government are seeking, in the face of a prolonged terrorist campaign in which more than 1800 people have been killed and another 20,000 injured, is to maintain the rule of law. It is an essential element of the Government's approach that those found guilty after due process of law shall, if they are sent to prison by the courts, serve out their sentences in prison conditions which are as fair and humane as possible. Any fair and humane prison system must

rest upon compliance with a set of Rules which apply to all convicted prisoners, not just to some of them. The Government, with overwhelming support in Parliament, has made it plain on repeated occasions that it will not be deflected from its policy of phasing out special treatment for prisoners, no matter what protests are made inside or outside the prisons.

Finally, I should like to make the point that the publicity given to the activities of the protesting prisoners, who constitute only 20% or so of the non-special category convicted prisoners, has taken attention away from the notable progress which has been made in Northern Ireland during the last three years or so in establishing a modern prison system with first-class facilities for work, vocational training, education and recreation. The arrangements in Northern Ireland in regard to such matters as visits, parcels and the wearing by prisoners of their own clothing during leisure periods are in advance of those in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Sincerely,
Ray