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H-BLOCKS PROTEST

The No Washing, Non-Co-operation Phase

BY FR DENIS FAUL AND FR RAYMOND MURRAY

THE 300 PRISONERS IN H-BLOCK 3 AND H-BLOCK 5, who have been refusing to wear prison clothes or to do prison work as a protest against removal of special category, political status, have escalated their protest by refusing to wash, to clean out their cells or chamber pots, by refusing to leave their cells or to co-operate in any way with prison staff. This escalation began as a protest about April 1, against deprivation of letters, frequent and apparently capricious searches of the body, removal to the punishment cells and the alleged beating of some prisoners. Now the no washing, no cleaning phase has become part of the original protest. It is a difficult and not-to-be-welcomed phase for everybody, prison staff, prisoners and their relatives.

At the end of April the scene is as follows:

- 1 There is an all pervading stench of urine in the Blocks. Excreta is thrown out the windows; urine is being emptied on the floors and in some cases on the mattresses.
- 2 All furniture has been removed from the cells or has been broken. All that remains is the bunk beds, one above the other for the two cell mates. The cells are stained with urine, papers and fluff are on the floor; there is a stench in the cell and from the inmates. The cell measures 10' x 6' x 9' high.
- 3 The men have begun to put off a stench since the weather became warm. Their feet are very dirty and they have beards; they have lost a lot of weight; either the food is insufficient or badly cooked or interfered with or they cannot eat it in the smelly and unhygienic conditions of the cells.
- 4 All clothes have been removed from the cells. The men must come to Mass on Sundays in Blue Towels. Before they enter the canteen chapel, they must enter a small room and take off the towel and allow their dirty bodies to be inspected back and front. This, most of them refused to do and were not at Mass; it is only a matter of time before there is no one at Mass.
- 5 The men are in their cells all day; they have no books of any kind, not even the religious ones: no papers or magazines: no TV or radio: no newspapers: no exercise; few visits no pens or writing material. Banging on the doors at night results in loss of sleep.
- 6 Complaints have been made about the alleged beating up of James Anthony McCooey during the week-end of April 16-17. Reports say his eye was badly bruised and his lips were burst. When a clerical visitor asked to see him on Wednesday 19 April he was told that he had gone to an outside hospital and that he was an epileptic and had fallen. Few are prepared to believe this.
- 7 Another prisoner Sean Campbell said he was beaten up on March 11 at the start of his hunger and thirst strike and he claims that the authorities are refusing to admit his solicitor Paschal O'Hare contrary to the 1975 decision of the European Commission of Human Rights. His request to see the Governor was avoided by telling him he must put on his clothes to see him. A great many rights, letters, visits to medical men, etc., can be taken off the prisoners by insisting on them wearing the clothes. Gerry McDaid, Billie McDonagh and Kieran Nugent also alleged beatings.
- 8 Prisoners on protest are described in official notices in the prison as "Strippers" or "Streakers"; these official references are inaccurate and gratuitously insulting.
- 9 One can sense the strain under which the prisoners are labouring and indeed the extra tension on everyone in the prison. It is a situation that should call forth the maximum humanitarian and Christian concern from all concerned people.
- 10 The situation is going to go on for a long time, maybe two years, maybe more: negotiators, mediators are needed to resolve the situation before innocent young lives are lost or are driven into Mental Hospitals.