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Statement by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
The Rt. Hon. Humphrey Atkins M.P. 7 August 1981

A statement was released by the Belfast Republican Press Centre on 6 August, said to be issued on behalf of certain prisoners in the Maze Prison, who describe themselves as "the Republican Prisoners of War, Long Kesh." I note in passing that all prisoners in the Maze have been convicted in open court of criminal offences, many of them of a very violent kind.

I have studied this statement with care in the hope that it would indicate that the protesting prisoners now accepted that in their own best interest they should bring the protest and the hunger-strike to an early end. To my profound regret I can see nothing in this latest document which represents any change of substance from their statement of 4 July, and nothing to suggest that they have understood the Government's reasons for refusing to concede their five demands.

I welcome (as I did in my statement of 8 July) the fact that the protestors are no longer claiming a privileged regime to set them apart from the other prisoners. That claim was always totally unjustified. Equally I deplore the protestors' apparent inability to understand the inevitable consequences which flow from the need for the prison authorities to retain proper control over the daily life of a prison. What a prisoners' statement calls "the present Victorian prison system" is in fact in the Maze, a complex of physical facilities of the most up to date kind, coupled with a regime which is not only one of the best in the United Kingdom but which stands comparison with the most enlightened systems in the western world.

I set out in my statement of 8 July, point by point what would happen in the prison, when the protest ended. I have nothing to add to that. The conditions under which in Northern Ireland prisoners are obliged to undertake various forms of work and are allowed to associate with each other are in substance the conditions which prevail in all other British prisons

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The Government sees no justification for giving the prisoners in Northern Ireland a substantially different regime - and certainly not on the ground that some of them claim that the serious crimes they committed were politically motivated. I have repeatedly made clear - as in my statement of 8 July - that it is the Government's intention to be flexible and humane in applying the present regime; but this does not mean that we will recreate the 'special category' regime, or anything approaching it.

It is of the greatest importance that the protestors, their families, and others who either influence their thinking or claim to speak for them, should understand clearly that the protestors' demands as elaborated in their latest statement, cannot be met unless the Government agree to the abandonment by the prison authorities of their proper responsibility for control within the prison. This the Government will not do, now or at any later stage.

I have sought in this statement to explain the underlying reason why it is impossible for the Government to do what the protestors ask. If the prisoners do not find it clear the authorities are always ready to clarify it to the hunger-strikers or to any individual prisoner on request. I sincerely hope that the protestors will now seriously reconsider the wisdom of continuing to pursue a course which cannot produce any benefit for them.