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11 June 1981

STATEMENT IN HOUSE OF COMMONS, BY RT HON HUMPHREY ATKINS, MP,
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND TO-DAY

I will, with permission Mr Speaker, make a statement on the escape from HM Prison Belfast. Eight prisoners escaped from HM Prison Belfast yesterday afternoon at about 4.15 pm. All of them were at the time on remand. The trial of seven of them had already ended, and the judge is expected to deliver his judgment tomorrow. Four of those were charged with the murder of an Army officer, Captain Westmacott, who was killed when the Army and police surrounded a house in the Antrim Road, Belfast, in May 1980. Two were charged with the murder, in April 1980, of Police Constable Magill. The seventh man, Ryan, was charged with the murder of an RUC constable in 1976 and a former member of the UDR in 1978. The eighth man, Gerard Sloan, was charged with being in possession of explosives. The trial in this latter case had not yet begun.

The escape began while the eight prisoners were in discussion with three solicitors in three separate groups, each group in a cubicle in the visiting room which is some 15 yards inside the main gate of the prison. The prisoners produced 3 pistols. Four prison officers were forced to hand over their uniforms, which were put on by four of the escaping prisoners. The escapers then made their way to the main gate of the prison, severely injuring a prison officer who attempted to prevent them from leaving the visiting area. The prison officer was struck on the head, and is in hospital with a suspected fractured skull.

At the main gate, prison officers on duty were forced at gunpoint to allow the prisoners to leave. The eight prisoners then went immediately to two cars which were apparently waiting for them. Up to this point they had not discharged firearms. The alarm was raised at the main gate, alerting other prison officers, and the Army and the police. At least one shot was fired by the escapers: fire was returned by Army and the police. Nobody appears to have been hit. The two vehicles were abandoned not far way, and it appears that the prisoners then hijacked other vehicles to continue their escape.

The police and army mounted a large-scale operation immediately after the escape. This operation is continuing, but so far none of the escaped prisoners has been arrested.

Immediately after the escape, 2 solicitors and one solicitor's apprentice were arrested and are still in police custody, as are two other men, subsequently arrested in connection with the escape.

I regard the escape of any prisoners, and especially the escape of men subject to such serious charges, as a matter of the greatest concern. At my request, my rt hon Friend the Home Secretary, has made available Mr W H Pearce CBE, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, to conduct an urgent enquiry into security arrangements at the prison relevant to the escape of these eight men and to report to me. The enquiry will begin immediately.