

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code: 2013/27/1596

Creation Date(s): July 1983

Extent and medium: 2 pages

Creator(s): Department of Foreign Affairs

Access Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

Irish Prisoners in Britain

Eighty of the 800 or so Irish prisoners in British jails are serving sentences for terrorist-type offences. While we receive both in Dublin, and via the Embassy in London, representations on their behalf, many of the prisoners on ideological grounds are reluctant to approach the Irish Government.

Conditions in British prisons in general are unpleasant mainly because of overcrowding due to the large number of detainees (about 45,000). Most Irish prisoners convicted for terrorist type offences are in security category A, the highest category, and transferred from prison to prison at short notice in the interest of security.

Issues which have been raised in the past with the Minister for Foreign Affairs by prisoners, their families or T.D.'s include:-

- (i) Inconvenience accruing to family visitors (both from N.I. and the State) arising from transfers within Britain. The Embassy has on many occasions stressed to the British Authorities the importance of having relatives informed of any change in a prisoner's location and recently expressed our concern over the widespread relocation and segregation of Irish prisoners after the Albany prison riot.
- (ii) The alleged innocence of prisoners. Cardinal Ó Fiaich raised this question recently when he said that he believed a number of Irish people serving sentences in English jails were innocent. He referred specifically to those who had been found guilty on forensic evidence in connection with the Birmingham, Guildford and Woolwich bombings. The Government's attitude has always been that it is not appropriate to comment on judicial decisions handed down by courts of another jurisdiction. In the absence of dramatic new evidence which would convince the Home Secretary to reopen these cases, there is little that can be done. The Home Secretary has recently been asked to reopen the case of the late Guiseppe Conlon who was convicted on forensic evidence alone of explosives offences.
- (iii) The application of Prison Rule 43. Under Rule 43 the Governor is empowered to remove a prisoner from association with other prisoners "for the maintenance of good order or discipline or in his own interests" for up to 24 hours on his own initiative. This is open to extension for a period not exceeding one month (but may be renewed from month to month) on the authority of a member of the visiting committee or board of visitors or the Secretary of State. This does not amount to solitary confinement in that prisoners subject to the measures have regular contact with prison officers and staff. However there is no limit to the number of periods of removal from association. Irish "terrorist-type" prisoners have in the past been isolated in this way and the problem has been raised on a number of occasions with the British authorities.

- (iv) The conditions under which a prisoner is living. Depending on the circumstances the Embassy in London would informally seek clarification on such a matter from the British authorities.
- (v) Transfer to a prison in Northern Ireland. There have not been any transfers from England or Wales since 1975 of Irish prisoners serving sentences for "political offences" to Northern Ireland. Four persons were permanently transferred to prisons in Northern Ireland, all in 1975. (pl. see separate note).

Anglo-Irish Section
July 1983