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ROINN GNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA
DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH 2
DUBLIN 2

Confidential

4 August 1978

Transf. Sec. Unit

D. Ó Suilleabháin, Uas.
Secretary
Department of the Taoiseach
Government Buildings
Dublin 2.

Dear Dan

The Minister has been in contact from Waterford on a number of occasions in recent days about the H-blocks situation and has asked that the Taoiseach be kept generally informed of developments. The statement (attached) issued by Archbishop Ó Fiaich on 1 August has caused reactions additional to those which have appeared in the media.

On the SDLP side, Michael Canavan in Derry and Paddy Duffy in Dungannon, have made public statements supporting the Archbishop and both have claimed they were speaking "for the SDLP". The SDLP leadership had, however, informally decided to make no comment and Gerry Fitt in particular was furious when he heard of the statements by Messrs. Canavan and Duffy though it should be noted that neither of them has departed from the SDLP position that special category status should not be granted. At one stage on 2 August Fitt even threatened to resign from the party because he believed that Canavan and Duffy had put the SDLP in the position of appearing to take their line from and give support to the "non-elected Archbishop". It took all of Hume's persuasive efforts to prevent the internal differences of opinion from becoming public. Hume himself is furious with Ó Fiaich's second intervention - the first being his Irish Press interviews last January - in what he regards as a primarily political question and his present intention is to make this privately known to the Archbishop at a very early date. (Despite their long-standing friendship since Hume was Ó Fiaich's first M.A. student at Maynooth, they have had almost no contact since Ó Fiaich's appointment to Armagh). The SDLP position on

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the H-blocks situation until now has been that the prisoners had brought the conditions on themselves and that neither that nor any other form of protest should cause any re-consideration of the special category status question.

There are at present 650 prisoners (373 Republicans, 277 Loyalists) in Long Kesh with special category status and about 1,200 without the status. By all accounts, the conditions are appalling for the approximately 300 Republican prisoners who are currently involved in the protest but, despite this, the minority community in NI has not generally shown much support for them. The Provisionals have tried particularly hard in the past year to make it a public issue in NI but so far they have failed almost completely, even in areas of traditional Provisional support. It does not seem likely at this stage that the Archbishop's statement will radically alter this position. Non-political leaders of the minority community e.g. Tom Conaty and Canon Murphy in west Belfast have told me that they dissociate themselves completely from the statement and that they have joined with many others in making their disagreement privately known to the Archbishop.

The Archbishop's statement has been widely publicised in the U.S. and that in turn has prompted advisers to Senator Kennedy and Speaker O'Neill to consider if they should make statements of support. Hume has been consulted by Kennedy's office and has advised strongly against it but the Embassy in Washington reports that Speaker O'Neill, who is beginning to feel that he is "too passive" on Irish questions, has not ruled out the possibility of saying something. It is unlikely that he will do so immediately but he may include a condemnation of conditions in the H-blocks when he next has a suitable opportunity to speak on Irish matters.

The Belfast Telegraph report of the Archbishop's press conference is enclosed. You will note that he is reported as saying that he had previously made representations to the Secretary of State for NI about conditions in the H-blocks but that he had had no response.

In our private contacts with British representatives, we have for some time been taking the line that (a) the conditions in the H-blocks were a matter of concern (b) it should be possible

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to take some measures to improve the situation without any concession on the principle of special category status and that (c) as long as conditions remained bad, the Provisionals had a potential weapon which they might use to regain support in minority areas. The most recent informal conversations on the subject were between the Minister and the British Ambassador at Woodstock on 2 August and between the undersigned and a senior Northern Ireland Office official in the course of a telephone conversation on 1 August.

Yours sincerely

Seán Donlon
Assistant Secretary