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26 March 1980

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland the Rt Hon Humphrey Atkins MP, was asked ~~today by~~ Mr John Farr, MP for Harborough, if he would make a statement about progress on the phasing out of special category status for convicted prisoners and about the protest by certain prisoners against this policy.

In a Written Answer Mr Atkins replied:

"On 1 March 1976 there were more than 1500 special category prisoners. Since then, under the policy introduced by the previous administration and which we have continued, special category status has not been granted to any prisoner sentenced for an offence committed on or after that date. There are now 443 special category prisoners, including 4 women.

"The dirty protest at Maze Prison, the objective of which is to obtain special category status, continues. The number of prisoners taking part in this bizarre campaign has remained fairly constant for over a year at between 350 and 360, as some newly-sentenced prisoners join the protest and others abandon it.

"During the last few weeks some women prisoners at Armagh have escalated their protest by refusing to wash. There is also some dirtying of the cells, but the situation is by no means comparable with that at Maze. There is no truth in the allegation, inherently unlikely, that the women were forced into this form of protest by being denied access to toilets.

"Persons convicted of terrorist-type offences committed before 1 March 1976 have continued to be granted special category, but I have decided that the time has come to put an end to new admissions. Accordingly, no persons charged on or after 1 April 1980 will be granted special category status, whatever the date of their offence.

"Those prisoners who already have special category status, and any more charged before 1 April to whom it may be granted, will be allowed to

retain it if they wish.

"The regime of the prisoners taking part in the dirty protest at Maze has been under constant review throughout. From the start the objective has been to treat the men concerned as humanely as possible; the Governor and his staff deserve the highest praise for the professionalism and restraint which they have shown over two years in dealing with this uniquely provocative form of protest. As a further humanitarian measure, and in order to give the prisoners concerned more opportunity for contacts with their families and friends, the disciplinary awards against them will from now on be adjusted to enable them to have one privilege visit a month as well as their statutory visit. The Governor will also consider any applications by individual prisoners for further visits. In addition, the prisoners will be permitted to write and receive a letter a week instead of one a month.

"It has been a feature of the Maze protest campaign that the prisoners have refused to take their daily exercise. As soon as the practical arrangements involved can be made, these prisoners will also be permitted - indeed encouraged - to take their daily exercise period in regulation short-sleeved PT vest, shorts and plimsolls.

"I emphasise, however, that there will be no concessions on the fundamental issue of special category status."