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STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

THE SITUATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND'S PRISONS

Mr Speaker, I will with permission make a statement about the position in Northern Ireland's prisons.

The seven Republican prisoners, who were in the fifty-third day of their hunger strike yesterday, have begun to take food. This includes the one prisoner who had been moved to Musgrave Park Hospital in view of his grave condition. In addition I can confirm that every prisoner at the Maze took breakfast this morning.

This is most welcome news. The hunger strike could not achieve its object, and it is encouraging that the influence of all those who sought to persuade the prisoners of that fact was finally effective.

I sincerely hope that the same conclusion will be drawn by all prisoners, men and women, who have been protesting in the cause for political status, including the three remaining hunger strikers at Armagh.

With the full support of the House, the Government has made it clear all along that it was not prepared to grant political status. The European Commission of Human Rights considered the case for political status made to it by the protesters, and rejected it. They asked the Government to keep the humanitarian aspects of the prison regime under continuing review. We responded positively to that request with the changes in the spring and summer which I set forth in my statement of 4 December. That remains in every particular the Government's position.

Yesterday I sent into the Maze and Armagh prisons a summary based on the Government's statement of 4 December which set out what will happen when the protests end. A copy of that summary, which I shall be repeating in a broadcast to the people of Northern Ireland today, has been given to every protesting prisoner. I will arrange for the text to be printed in the Official Report.

The Government earnestly hopes that the knowledge of what will happen when the protests end will lead all the prisoners concerned to stop all their protests.