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Seen, ^{John} many thanks
TR 19/6/87.

PERMANENT MISSION OF
IRELAND TO THE UNITED NATIONS

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18 June 81

Dear John

With reference your phone call
today, I enclose an informal
copy of a report made to the
Committee on the H-Block issue
following the recent session of
ECOR in NY.

Yours

David O'Sullivan

417/473/1
18 June

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CONFIDENTIAL

Ambassador:

Following the delegation's discussion of the Bobby Sands case earlier this week, I attach a note on U.N. reactions to the case, especially as they arose during the First Regular Session of ECOSOC which concluded on 8 May last. During the ECOSOC Session, I was also told that African and possibly other delegations on the Security Council had been approached by NORAIID to raise the issue with a view to a statement by the President of the Security Council. The Steve Biko case was cited as a precedent for such a statement by one delegate (Algeria) who mentioned this approach to me.

Other officers in the Mission may be in a position to supplement or modify my own impressions.

Declan

Declan O'Donovan

15 May 1981

The Bobby Sands Case

The human rights debate in the Social Committee of ECOSOC coincided with the last throes of the hunger strike of the IRA prisoner in Long Kesh, Bobby Sands. The case was highly publicised in the American media and perhaps as a result other delegates and Secretariat officials showed a keen interest in it. The Department's briefing on the case and the public statements of the Taoiseach were very useful in responding to enquiries by delegates and officials. The Delegation sought guidance from the Department as to whether any reference should be made to the case and as to what line it should take if it were raised in statements, in particular, if there should be any criticism of the Government's actions. (It should be explained that several delegations and some Secretariat officials enquired as to why the Government was not giving much greater publicity to its views on the case). The Delegation was particularly conscious that a usual wide-ranging speech which would have included references to Chile, El Salvador and other cases of human rights violations might have drawn a response on the Sands case.

The instructions of the Department were that the statement should not refer to the Sands case and should be such as to give no reason for comment on the case by other delegations. It was agreed that the Delegation speech could concentrate on one or two issues arising from the report of the CHR.

It may be worth examining the effect which the Sands hunger strike had on other delegations in the ECOSOC. The following is a brief analysis of the ^{informal} reactions of other delegations and Secretariat officials.

Western delegations and the officials of the Division on Human Rights were generally well-informed about the Sands hunger strike as well as of the specific demands of the hunger strikers. Unlike delegations from other regions, they tended not to make enquiries from us about the case. On the whole, they accepted the British Government's view of the situation but in most cases felt that the British Government had stupidly painted itself into a corner on the issue. (This was a view also expressed privately by British delegates.) The fact that neither Amnesty International nor other prestigious NGOs, nor the European Commission on Human Rights, supported the demands of the prisoners was an important factor in the minds of Western delegations. Some Western delegations are aware that Amnesty International has criticised our own prison conditions in the past. The Director of the Division of Human Rights also noted this in discussing the case. We are aware that this is a point which has been made by the British delegation in its private briefings of other Western colleagues.

Finally, with reference to the views of Eastern Europeans below, some Western delegations are apprehensive that Northern Ireland issues may be exploited by Eastern Europeans and possibly by other delegations in order to divert attention from other questions and to put Western countries on the defensive.

The Director of the Division of Human Rights and other officials in the Division let me know informally that they had received a large number of communications and representations on the Bobby Sands case. The UK Mission in Geneva is routinely informed of representations received by the Division of Human Rights and the UK Mission in New York is similarly informed of representations received in the Human Rights Liaison Office here. We are aware that while the Director of Human Rights was in New York, he pressed the Secretary-General's office to express some concern for the humanitarian aspects of the Sands case. One or two references to the Secretary-General's concern for these aspects were made by the Press spokesman and a very brief statement was issued by the Secretary-General after Mr. Sands' death (reported by Mr. Kelleher to the Department).

The officer dealing with the matter in the Human Rights Liaison Office in New York is a Cypriot with whom I have discussed the Northern Ireland background. Not unnaturally, this particular officer sees a strong parallel with the Cyprus case. I have found him sympathetic to us and more inclined to keep us informed of developments on Northern Ireland issues within the Secretariat than some of his colleagues. He has difficulty, however, in understanding our public reticence on Northern Ireland issues and has made a point of telling me that NORAIID representatives have been bitterly critical of the Government's position in interviews with him. The interest in the Division of Human Rights may be contrasted with the attitude of the Secretary-General's political advisers in his office. The officer dealing with the Sands case was dismissive of all aspects of the case, comparing

it with similar actions by the Baader Meinhof Gang members and others.

The enquiries which we received from Eastern European delegates tended to be provocative. Why did we not raise the issue? What were the British doing in Northern Ireland anyway? Was not Bobby Sands "a hero for the cause"? These delegations were well-informed about the case and the background to it. At the last two sessions of the Commission on Human Rights, the Eastern Europeans have used Northern Ireland issues as a weapon in East/West confrontations on human rights. Their references to Northern Ireland were very brief at ECOSOC, matching the lowered tone of Western comments including, noticably, UK comments, on Afghanistan and Kampuchea.

With a few exceptions delegations from other groups are not well-informed about Northern Ireland. They are very sympathetic to us but have a poor appreciation of the facts. Many of the Latin Americans have a strong anti-British streak which comes to the fore in issues like these. In a few cases, for example, Brazil, Chile and Argentina, there is a recognition that the case of Northern Ireland could be used to divert the attention of the United Nations from human rights violations in Latin America and perhaps also to divide Western delegations and put them somewhat on the defensive.

Many African and Asian countries, see us as a country with strong revolutionary traditions and have a confused idea of the modern IRA. Radical African and Asian countries especially

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tended to come to us to make enquiries and to express sympathy regarding the Sands case.

Arab delegations were clearly impressed by the extremely wide and intense publicity given to the Sands case and on the last day of the ECOSOC session, brought forward a resolution on the case of Ziad Abu Ain, a young Palestinian who has been held in custody in the United States for the last 18 months, pending decision on his extradition to Israel for "terrorist crimes". The international criticism of Mrs. Thatcher for her "crimes are crimes are crimes" statements appeared to prompt the Arabs to insert a rejection of the notion that PLO acts are common crimes in the resolution. It should also be noted that Mr. Ain was, at least at one point, refusing cooperation with the USA prison authorities on the grounds that he is a political prisoner. Some Arab delegations, including the PLO (which authored the draft) mentioned what they saw as a similarity with the Sands case.

CW
15/5/81