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## HM PRISON, MAZE

Replying to a written Parliamentary Question on HM Prison, Maze, at Westminster today, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Rt Hon Humphrey Atkins, MP, said:

"On 4 December I described (Official Report, c 375) the normal regime applicable in Northern Ireland prisons, and I placed a fuller account in the Library of the House. On 19 December I described (Official Report, c 1031) what would happen to any prisoners at the Maze and Armagh Prisons who ended their protests.

"When an individual protesting prisoner says that he wishes to conform to prison rules, having washed, shaved and had a haircut, he is normally given civilian clothing supplied by the prison (in place of the former prison uniform), moved from his cell to a wing containing other conforming prisoners and medically examined for fitness to work. He is then, if fit, allocated suitable activities and work (including of course work related to the servicing of the prison). As a normal prisoner he then qualifies for privileges including that of wearing out of working hours his own leisure clothing of an approved type for which he may send. This procedure has been followed by the 69 prisoners who have ended their protest since 19 December.

"The hunger strike at the Maze and Armagh Prisons ended on 18 and 19 December. The last so-called Loyalist protesters at the Maze ended their protest on Monday 2 February. The dirty protest, however, continues: at the Maze 407 are currently involved, 59 fewer than on



19 December and 98 fewer than the peak number reached early in the hunger strike; 29 women prisoners are involved in the dirty protest at Armagh.

"It had been my hope that the ending of the hunger strike before Christmas would lead speedily to the ending of all the other protests. Since it did not do so, the prison authorities at the Maze, with the full backing of the Government, took the initiative to move groups of protesting prisoners into clean and furnished cells, without waiting for these prisoners to say that they intended to end their protest: and in three stages, on 12, 13 and 15 January, a total of 96 prisoners were moved into clean furnished cells at the Maze, which they then kept clean. All protesting prisoners at the Maze (and, later, at Armagh) were told in writing about what was being done, and why. A reduced scale of punishment was applied to those prisoners who kept their cells and furniture clean in that their loss of remission was reduced by a half and one parcel a month was made available. Again, all the protesting prisoners at the Maze were told in writing about these developments; that furnishings would be similarly supplied to other protesting prisoners as soon as they had indicated; by refraining from fouling their cells, that they wanted it; and that the next step in the establishment of a normal regime and the privileges that go with it would be the issue of civilian clothing supplied by the prison to those who would wear it.

"On 23 January, 20 of the 96 prisoners indicated that they were prepared to wash, shave and have their hair cut, and to keep their cells clean. They said, however, that they were not prepared to move from their existing cells nor to take part in work other than that of cleaning their own cells and receiving full-time education. They also said that they were not prepared to wear prison issue civilian clothing unless their own leisure clothing was provided at the same time. They were thus demanding a regime for themselves which was and was intended to be different from the normal regime of the prison, particularly in respect of work, and the wearing of their own leisure clothing which is a privilege available only to conforming prisoners for wear outside working hours. In the circumstances, the authorities had no alternative but to refuse its issue to these 20 prisoners. They were, however, allowed, as is their right, to



wash, shave and have a hair cut, which they did: and they were told that civilian clothing supplied by the prison was available, which they did not accept. On 27 January all 96 prisoners, at about 8.00 pm, started to damage their cells and their furniture. They were therefore moved to the nearest available empty cells in each of the two respective wings, some of which had still not been cleaned from their previous occupancy. All 96 were however put into clean cells the following day but these they then started to foul.

"I regret that the successive steps taken in January have not led, as I hoped, to the ending of the dirty protest. The Government believes that the normal prisons regime, the privileges that go with it, and the steps by which the protesting prisoners could have secured those privileges by progressively accepting the normal regime have been fully and clearly explained. We shall continue our efforts to bring an end to the protest on this basis.

"The principles by which the Government has stood in the face of the protests at the Maze and Armagh prisons still stand. It will not concede that it should now establish within the normal Northern Ireland prison regime a special set of conditions for particular groups of prisoners. It will not surrender control of what goes on in the prisons to a particular group of prisoners. It will not concede the demand for political status or recognise that murder and violence are less culpable because they are claimed to be committed for political motives."

Mr Atkins was replying to Mr Tony Durant, (Reading North) who asked the Secretary of State if he would make a statement on the protests by republican prisoners in Her Majesty's Prison, Maze.