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- A Commission of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference

STATEMENT ON THE HUNGER STRIKE AND THE PROTEST IN THE MAZE

PRISON NORTHERN IRELAND

Issued by the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, Wednesday
8th July, 1981, at 17.00 hours, in Belfast

The text of the following statement is included as part of the press statement on the Hunger Strike and the Protest in the Maze Prison Northern Ireland, which was issued by the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, Wednesday 8th July, 1981, at 17.00 hours, in Belfast, and is to be read in conjunction with it.

On June 3rd, 1981, the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace issued a statement on the hunger-strike in the Maze prison which made three suggestions in an effort to promote a resolution of the hunger-strike and the blanket protest. These suggestions were:

1. That prisoners in the Maze, who are at present permitted to wear their own clothes for a greater part of the time should, like the prisoners in Armagh, be allowed to do so at all times.
2. That some moves might be made to increase opportunities for association while making it clear that military training, or any other activity that would be illegal in society at large, would not be tolerated in the prison.
3. That the question of prison work should be reviewed both in order to ensure that the work is of the greatest possible cultural and educational value and that no work of a demeaning nature is demanded.

Encouraged by the public reception our statement received, the I.C.J.P. sought a response from the interested parties in the dispute to ascertain whether our statement could provide an avenue for a resolution. In this context the Commission sought a meeting with the N.I.O. and on June 23rd, 1981, met Mr. Michael Alison, M.P., Minister for State, and senior officials.

The meeting was held on the strict understanding that the Commission was in no sense negotiating, but rather seeking to clarify the attitude of the British Government to our suggestions. The Commission fully accepted and accepts the principle that the response to our suggestion was being discussed in the context of the whole Northern Ireland prison system and of the general principle of over-all Governmental control.

It was followed by three further meetings on June 26th and July 3rd and 4th with Mr. Allison at which further clarification was sought and given. In all, these four meetings spanned over 16 hours.

Following the second meeting, the Minister on June 30th, 1981, transmitted a letter to the Commission responding to the points raised in our statement and at the first two meetings. This letter also referred the Commission to the statement issued on the same date by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mr. Humphrey Atkins.

The meetings which we had with Mr. Alison on July 3rd and 4th were to obtain further clarification of the points discussed at the earlier meetings, and of the letter to us from Mr. Alison of June 30th, taken together with Mr. Atkin's statement of the same date.

At the conclusion of our meeting of July 4th we requested of the Minister of State permission to enter the Maze Prison to seek a meeting with the eight men on hunger-strike to inform them of the clarification we had received from the Minister in response to our June 3rd statement. This permission was given, and the eight hunger strikers met us later on July 4th, the 57th day on hunger strike of Joe McDonnell, one of the eight.

We informed the prisoners of the clarification given by the Minister in response to our statement of June 3rd, at the four meetings and in his letter to the ICJP of June 30th. Having regard to the substance of these clarifications we told the hunger-strikers that in the event of the hunger-strike coming to an end, the British Government would be under a moral obligation to take action on the three areas suggested by us in our June 3rd statement within a reasonable time scale which we could suggest.

In particular, in the event of the hunger-strike coming to an end, the British Government would be under a moral obligation to allow all prisoners to wear their own clothes at all times as of right (unless such clothes resembled prison officers' uniforms, constituted a form of paramilitary uniform, or were manifestly outlandish) and whether or not the blanket protest came to an end.

In our opinion, a reasonable time scale to implement this (including embodying in prison regulations the right for all prisoners to wear all of their own clothes at all times) is two weeks from the ending of the hunger-strike.

In the event of the hunger-strike coming to an end the British Government will be under a moral obligation:

A: to increase opportunities for association between prisoners in an open-handed and flexible manner and in particular:

- (i) to allow movement by all prisoners during daily exercise time between the exercise yards of every two adjacent wings in each block;
- (ii) to allow movement by all prisoners between the recreation rooms of every two adjacent wings in each block during the daily recreation periods.

These movements would be subject in the final analysis to the principles of security and maintenance of overall control by the authorities. In our opinion a reasonable time scale for the implementation of these reforms is four weeks from the date when the protest comes to an end.

Furthermore we feel that in the context of the new situation which would be created were the protest to end, the British Government should seriously consider, as part of the generous and flexible approach to prison management referred to in Mr. Atkins' statement of June 30th, allowing an extension of the daily periods of association within individual wings (e.g. between the hours of 7.15 to 8.30 a.m. and 5.00 to 5.30 p.m.). However this would be under supervision.

B: To increase to the maximum the range of useful activities which prisoners may engage in during the week, to afford each prisoner the widest choice of activities which as far as possible are congenial to him, within the broad and flexible framework of prison management, excluding work which can be regarded as demeaning in particular circumstances and subject in the final analysis to the principle that all prisoners are required to be engaged in some useful activity.

The following are a list of proposals made by the I.C.J.P. which the British Government has considered compatible with the above:

- (i) Provision should be made for prisoners with an acceptable level of skill, knowledge and expertise in the areas of culture, education, and practical living including arts and crafts, to pass on such skill, knowledge and expertise to other prisoners as part of the range of useful activities in which prisoners might engage.

- (ii) Prisoners may choose to work for charitable and voluntary bodies on condition that, if necessary, the body concerned shall provide materials free of cost to the prisoners to enable such work to be done. There would be no remuneration for prisoners engaged in the above activities. Prisoners may opt for work of a remunerative nature.
- (iii) A prisoner who fails to find accommodation within the choices provided may, in the last analysis, be required to do remunerative work though he may refuse remuneration.

Such work may include work by prisoners on the construction of a church or equivalent facilities for religious worship within the prison. The British Government have indicated that this list need not be exhaustive and that other proposals will be considered.

It is the Commission's view that personal laundry could be accommodated within the prisoners' own block or prison floor.

In our opinion a reasonable time scale for the implementation of these measures would be four weeks for number (i) above, eight weeks for number (ii) above, and six months for the type of activity outlined at (iii) above. The time scale for increasing the range of useful activities available to prisoners to an acceptable level would be eight weeks from the date of the ending of the hunger strike.

We also obtained clarification that in addition to the aspects of the prison regime outlined above, on the ending of the protest, prisoners would be entitled every month to receive four visits, to send up to eight letters and receive back a proportionate number, and receive a weekly parcel. Prisoners serving a sentence of over two years shall have radios in their cells.

It is clearly understood by the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace that if the protest were to come to an end a new situation would be created. At present, prisoners who have come off protest receive a restoration of full remission for the unexpired portion of their sentence and restoration of 20% of the amount forfeited because of their protest, subject to continuing good conduct.

If and when the present protest ends the British Government will be "imaginative" and "dramatic". We believe that such words should mean at the very least the restoration of the greater part of the remission already forfeited and that total remission should be

sympathetically considered in a spirit of magnanimity.

We understand that the British Government is prepared to recognise the cultural aspirations of the prisoners and to facilitate them as far as possible. We believe that the Government is morally bound to and will allow the introduction of Irish literature and textbooks, and Irish language and cultural classes on a comprehensive basis. We note as evidence of goodwill on this point that the Government has already allowed a copy of the new Irish language Bible to be presented by the Commission to the prisoners.

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