

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2011/127/1058
Creation Date(s):	31 July 1981
Extent and medium:	6 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Access Conditions:	Open
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It should first be understood that the hunger strike is a crisis within a crisis. General conditions in Northern Ireland - economic, social and political - have steadily deteriorated in recent years. To the problems of a faltering economy and the highest unemployment rate in Europe must be added a marked political polarization between the two parts of the divided community, clearly shown in the District Council elections in May. Moderates of all allegiances are discouraged. Ordinary people in both sections of the community have experienced suffering and misery on a heart-rending scale. The happiness and hopes of an entire generation of young people have been blighted by twelve years of crisis and disorder. After over two thousand deaths, violence and intimidation continue.

This is the background to the hunger strike, which is the latest method chosen by the Provisional IRA to exploit the prison crisis. The prison protest which began several years ago was intended by the Provisional IRA to intensify their campaign outside the prison and the hunger strike weapon was in turn intended to intensify and raise the effects of the prison protest to a cruel and more dramatic level.

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It is hardly necessary to describe in detail what the effects of the hunger strike have been here and abroad. We have seen in all parts of the island how the hunger strike generates propaganda which simultaneously not only appeals to extremists but also gains support from those who are moved by the loss of young lives and the bereavement of families.

Violence related to the hunger strike has occurred repeatedly in Northern Ireland. Here also there has been a disgraceful upsurge of violence, destruction of property and intimidation associated with the events in the Maze prison culminating in a savage attack on the Garda Síochána in Dublin on Saturday, the 18th July.

One point is lamentably clear: only those forces which are prepared to use violence to attain their ends derive any benefit from what is happening. Those forces will be implacably resisted by the Government of this State in all circumstances to protect the peace and the free institutions of the people.

In Government, as in Opposition, we give to the solution of the problem of Northern Ireland a high priority. It has been clear for some time that the protest has been exacerbating the existing problems of Northern Ireland,
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damaging the prospects of political progress and putting further off the day when stability and peace can be enjoyed by its suffering people.

We must also be seriously concerned at the effects of the hunger strike in this part of the country and at its potential effects on Anglo-Irish relations.

We assumed office at a time when the European Commission of Human Rights had made efforts to assist in a solution and when the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace had done a very great deal of work towards the same end. On our first day in office we urged on the British Government that the initiative of the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace be facilitated. After some delay this was accepted. We have throughout been satisfied that the Commission's document, given to the British authorities on 6th July, after very full discussion with both them and the prisoners and representing a detailed description of an improved regime after the strike ended, formed an adequate basis for a solution that conceded no basic principles.

I regret to say that it has been clear from the handling of the problem by the British authorities that their assessment of the gravity of the situation created by the
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hunger strike has not corresponded with ours and that they have not recognised the well-founded character of our concerns for the further consequences that would flow from its prolongation.

The responsibility for failure does not lie only with hesitation or delay on the part of the British. On the contrary, there is no doubt that intransigence was shown on the other side just when it seemed likely that the British, however belatedly, were proposing to take an initiative. On the 18th July, a statement issued on behalf of the prisoners rejected previous efforts at mediation and called for direct negotiations on the original five demands.

It seems to me to be no accident that as the efforts of the Irish Government to help solve the crisis became more public, the efforts of the Provisional IRA leadership to obstruct a solution redoubled. The hardening of the IRA line thwarted the efforts of those who had pressed for a humanitarian solution and who included, at different times, the European Commission of Human Rights, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, and several eminent churchmen. In thwarting those efforts, the leadership of the Provisional IRA, far from saving lives, was once again facing all

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those concerned with a stark choice between total concession to their demands and the deaths of further hunger strikers.

The prisoners represent themselves as belonging to a military command structure. It is clear that those who are in charge of this structure can at any time end the crisis by ordering the hunger strikers to end their protest. They have not done so. They cannot evade responsibility in the deaths of the hunger strikers although they seek to do so by manipulation of the media.

Despite these events the efforts of the Government to help solve the impasse have continued and will continue.

Besides its numerous contacts with non-governmental bodies and individuals of goodwill, this Government has had almost daily contact about the hunger strike with the British Government since the evening of the 30th June. We have continued to press the British authorities to find solutions both in relation to the procedure for and substance of a settlement.

The Government refuses to believe that a solution cannot be found. Despite the demands from many who are themselves understandably under great strain, we will not

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take action which is based only on an emotional response to tragic events and which would inevitably make it more difficult if not impossible for us to contribute further to a solution.

No death which has occurred and no future death should be the pretext for further acts of violence. Disappointment at successive setbacks to our hopes will not deter the Government from continuing its efforts to help find a solution before more young lives are thrown away and more deaths occur in the streets of Northern Ireland.