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cc: PS/PUS (L & B)
Mr Bell ✓
Mr Marshall O/R
Mr Wyatt
Mr Palmer
Mr Doyne-Ditmas
Mr Gilliland
Mr Corbett O/R
Mr Blatherwick
Mr Abbott

Mr Blelloch

HUNGER STRIKES: INTERNATIONAL REACTION

I attach a letter dated 17 August from Mr Fergusson in FCO which I have been a bit slow to circulate, partly because I have been brooding (with help from Mr Abbott) on how to handle it. I understand that at one stage Sir Ian Gilmour had it in mind to write to the Secretary of State along these lines but in the end decided not to do so: the text and style betray this background in places!

2. It is not entirely clear what Mr Fergusson is proposing. If FCO believes that the Government's policy needs to be changed because we now face international pressures which we can no longer withstand, then it must be for FCO Ministers to put their views to Ministerial colleagues for collective discussion. I believe Mr Marshall made that point to Mr Fergusson at the discussion mentioned at the beginning of the letter. We of course have taken careful account of international factors as our policy on the hunger strikes has developed. As regards the first sentence of paragraph 6 of the letter, I doubt if it is for NIO alone to weigh the international dimension against other arguments: this is surely a point which should be considered collectively by Ministers.

3. As regards the comments on presentation, I think that the two guidance telegrams which NIO produced last week should go a considerable way to meeting Mr Fergusson's worries. Washington have already told us that these guidances are precisely what they wanted; and RID have suggested to us that the guidances now largely overtake the last page of Mr Fergusson's letter.

4. I doubt whether the letter calls for a detailed reply. There are one or two points to which we could take exception, but I would be reluctant to send a combative reply. Subject to your views, and those of copy recipients, I propose to reply along the lines of the attached draft.



M J MORIARTY
25 August 1981

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DRAFT LETTER

ADDRESSEE'S REFERENCE

TO	ENCLOSURES	COPIES TO BE SENT TO
E A J Fergusson Esq FCO London SW1A 2AH		PS/PUS (L & B) Mr Bell Mr Marshall Mr Blelloch Mr Wyatt Mr Palmer Mr Doyne-Ditmas Mr Gilliland Mr Corbett Mr Blatherwick Mr Abbott
(FULL POSTAL ADDRESS)		(FULL ADDRESSES, IF NECESSARY)

LETTER DRAFTED FOR SIGNATURE BY..... MR MORIARTY
(NAME OF SIGNATORY)

THE HUNGER STRIKES

Thank you for your letter of 17 August about FCO concern at the international implications of the hunger strike campaign in Northern Ireland.

Taking first your remarks about the presentation of our policy overseas, I hope that your worries have been largely overtaken by the detailed guidance contained in FCO telegrams 119 and 120 of 20 August, which John Blelloch and others in Belfast and London considered carefully before it issued. I believe that this guidance, on which posts have been enjoined to draw freely, should deal with any misunderstandings about the width of the gap between the Government and the protesting prisoners. In particular we have spelt out what granting the five demands would mean in practice. If our Ministers judged it right to issue a further statement in the near future, I believe that we could usefully build on that guidance.

A good deal has of course been done, as you will know, to improve

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18 AUG 1981

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

17 August 1981

M J Moriarty Esq
Northern Ireland Office
Great George Street
LONDON SW1

Dear Michael,

THE HUNGER STRIKES

1. As you will know, John Marshall and I had a talk last Tuesday at which I mentioned the FCO's increasing concern about some of the international implications of the hunger strike campaign in Northern Ireland.
2. You will have seen the reporting from our Ambassadors in Washington and Dublin and will be aware of the damage that the hunger strikes and the attendant IRA propaganda campaign are doing to the reputation and, indeed, to the wider interests, of the Government and of the country. For instance, Washington have reported the possibility that Irish-American Congressmen might attempt to block the annual renewal of certain Government-to-Government defence contracts. Our Ambassador to the United Nations has also warned of the possibility that a hostile resolution on Northern Ireland could be passed in the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly. Such a resolution would be an important propaganda coup for the IRA and a serious humiliation for the Government.
3. There are also more direct risks to security in Northern Ireland. There are already clear indications that the flow of funds for the IRA from the United States is significantly increasing. This flow is likely to build up further if Irish-American dissatisfaction with HMG's handling of the hunger strike continues to grow. Perhaps more seriously, the Government in Dublin are growing more and more concerned about the effect on the stability of their country if tension continues to build up over the hunger strikers and violence spills over the border from the North. Their immediate anxiety, which is clearly behind the remarks of the Taoiseach this weekend, the recent statements by Mr Kelly and Mr O'Leary's radio interview, is over the domestic political situation. As Sir Leonard Figg has reported, the Irish Government are seriously worried that the IRA could exploit their successes in the Irish election to force another general election in the Republic later this year; as a result of

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this a few successful IRA candidates might well hold the balance of power in the Dáil. Such an election would almost certainly result in the return to power of Mr Haughey, who would however be circumscribed in such a way that he could not pursue the kind of policies from which we had earlier benefited. If this were to happen it would have direct repercussions on cross-border security cooperation, about which the Dáil is already sensitive, and Anglo-Irish relations generally.

4. Our present policy over the hunger strikes, however logical and tenable viewed from the point of Northern Ireland's needs, has in fact been based on the assumption that the external environment would remain constant or at least that no pressures would build up overseas with which we would not be able to cope. I fear that matters have turned out differently. The factors which I have mentioned pose considerable risks to the Government's Northern Ireland policies. I realise that what I am saying will not come to you as a complete surprise; nor will you be surprised if I stress how important it is that full notice should be taken of the international aspects in the formulation of tactics.

5. The ideal form of progress would, of course, be an early end to the campaign. But this does not seem likely. We seem to have reached a stalemate. The hunger strikers have bitten the bullet of self-martyrdom and are determined to hold out for the substance of their Five Demands and the effective acceptance by the Government that they are political prisoners. Meanwhile the Government are equally firm in their resolve not to give away control of the prisons. We all believe that it is right to refuse to concede political status and, indeed, our stand on this principle is generally supported elsewhere. But this has not stopped either the Irish Government or the 'Friends of Ireland' in the USA repeatedly calling on HMG to show more flexibility. They have variously expressed support for the ICJP's proposals and suggested that the Government set down clearly just what changes they are prepared to make to the prison regime when the hunger strike ends. Recently the Irish Government have suggested that we introduce these changes for conforming prisoners. The Northern Ireland Secretary has so far rejected these ideas either because they conflict with our principles or because he has judged them to be tactically wrong. But I think that we could make some move to show that we are responsive to their pleas and to help them to understand our point of view. Both the Irish Government and the 'Friends of Ireland' can influence their respective

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constituencies; some of the risks to security in Northern Ireland which I have described would be reduced if we could bring them closer to our position.

6. It is, of course, for you, not us, to weigh these risks against all the other arguments involved. If you continue to judge that it would be unwise for the Government to explain precisely what changes they are willing to make to the prison regime, the FCO will continue, of course, to accept your assessment. But there appears to be a good deal of misunderstanding outside about the breadth of the gap between what the Government are prepared to do and what the protesting prisoners are demanding and a widespread belief that the ICJP's proposals are reasonable and would not breach our principles. This is a presentational point. If we cannot set out what we are prepared to do, I should nevertheless see advantage in the Government explaining as clearly as possible, and in detail, in a public statement, just what the implications of the prisoners' demands are and why they - and the ICJP's proposals - are unacceptable. I envisage a statement which explained precisely why 'free association', for instance, would give the prisoners the freedom to organise military training, manufacture weapons and intimidate other prisoners.

7. The hunger strike campaign may well drag on for several months. If it does, FCO Ministers may consider that presentational changes will not be enough to prevent the very serious potential dangers which may arise later in the year. One could not exclude their proposing that the Government review how far it is desirable, or even possible, to stay on the present course! But for the time being there appears to be scope for neutralising some of the widespread external misunderstanding of our policies (we are, for instance, agreed on a set of proposals to step up our information efforts in the United States), without making any shift in substance and I hope that we shall be able to make full use of this. I, RID and the others concerned in the FCO are ready at any time to discuss further with the NIO what needs to be, and what might be, done.

Yours ever,
E A J

E A J Fergusson

cc

R L L Facer Esq, Cabinet Office