

REVISED DRAFT STATEMENT - HUNGER STRIKE AND PROTEST : 3 MARCH 1981

I will, with permission, Mr Speaker, make a statement on the latest developments in the protests by Republican prisoners in Maze Prison.

On 1 March one of the prisoners at Maze refused food and declared himself to be on hunger strike. In a statement on Sunday attributed to the prisoners they say that this action is being taken, once again, in support of their demand for political status. Their claim for such status has been rejected in clear terms by the European Commission of Human Rights, by this Government and by all sides in this House. I must make it clear, once again, in case there is doubt anywhere of this Government's resolve, that we shall not give way on the issue of political status under pressure of further protest action, whatever form this takes and whether it is inside or outside the prisons.

Yesterday, the Republican prisoners still taking part in the dirty protest at Maze and Armagh prisons let it be known that they intended to stop fouling their cells. 240 men prisoners have, accordingly, already been moved into clean cells and provided with clean bedding. The rest will be moved as quickly as further clean cells become available. The women prisoners should all be in clean cells today.

The Government welcomes this decision by the prisoners to put an end to the degrading conditions which they have imposed upon

/themselves.

themselves. But, in another statement, the prisoners have indicated that their action is being taken in support of demands for changes in the prison regime which would meet their demand for political status. In this they differ from those 80 prisoners who have stopped protesting altogether since the last hunger strike ended on 18 December, and who are now receiving the full range of privileges and facilities which I described in my statement of 4 December, including that of association, and of wearing their own leisure clothing of an approved type, in the evening and at weekends. That regime remains available for all who - as I hope - choose to take advantage of it: nothing has been added and nothing taken away.

I believe it to be generally accepted that the NI Prison Regime is humane and enlightened, and compares favourably with that in the rest of the United Kingdom and abroad. Subject to the requirements of security and the availability of resources, our commitment to maintain and develop it stands.