

SECRET



1A

Ref. A03835

PRIME MINISTER

Cabinet: Northern Ireland

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will be making a report on the current situation to the Cabinet on 18th December. I attach a copy of the draft of a letter which he will circulate before the Cabinet meeting to all members of the Cabinet, giving an up-to-date report on the situation.

2. There has been one very significant development. Mr. John Hume, who has emerged as the only person whom the hunger strikers are prepared to trust, has told Sir Kenneth Stowe in a telephone conversation this evening that, if the Government can offer two minor concessions, he can "guarantee" (his word) that the hunger strike, the "dirty" protest and the blanket protest will all be brought to an end. The two concessions are as follows:-

- (a) On clothing, when the new civilian-style clothing is issued in the near future, it will be personally issued to individual prisoners and available to them on purchase for subsequent use after their discharge, i.e. the individual garments will become their clothes while they are in prison, and when they leave it, if they wish.
- (b) In regard to free association, this will be allowed within each wing during meals, education, training and leisure and, subject to the overriding requirements of security, prisoners will have maximum use of amenities in each wing. What this apparently means is that instead of those prisoners wanting to watch television being locked in the television room, while others are in the handicraft room etc., prisoners in each wing (25 cells - up to 50 prisoners) will be free to ebb and flow. But the staff will still be free to revert to a more restrictive regime if circumstances demand.

These concessions would be available to all prisoners in Northern Ireland - though they would no doubt be claimed as having been achieved by the strikers. They would involve a minor adjustment to the existing regime. The Northern Ireland

SECRET

SECRET



Office consider that they would not represent any compromise on the principles of no political status, no differentiation and no surrender of control within prisons to the prisoners.

3. There are four unanswered questions:

- (i) would these minor concessions really be sufficient to call off all the protests, or would they be a prelude to further demands;
- (ii) what reason is there to believe that Mr. Hume is right in thinking that they would; and
- (iii) what would the strikers and the IRA be able to make of the concessions, both in presentational terms and in terms of practical life in the prisons?
- (iv) if they were successful in ending the protests, would that advantage be worth the risks that that would be claimed as a victory by the PIRA and its sympathisers and a betrayal by the Unionists? Would the Government have a good answer to that?

4. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is likely to tell you that, subject to your agreement, a senior Northern Ireland Office official, accompanied by Mr. Hume, would seek to negotiate an end to the prison protests on these terms during the afternoon of Thursday 18th December. If he was successful, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would probably make a television announcement during the evening.

5. You will be discussing all this with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Home Secretary at 9.30 am. The outcome of that meeting will colour the Secretary of State's subsequent report to the Cabinet, but if the Secretary of State's proposal is agreed at the 9.30 meeting I do not think that it should be mentioned (in any other than the most general and unspecific terms) to the whole Cabinet.

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

17th December, 1980

-2-

(approved by Sir R
Armstrong and signed
on his behalf)

SECRET

E. R. ●
SECRET

DRAFT LETTER FROM PS/SECRETARY OF STATE TO PS/PRIME MINISTER AND
PS/CABINET MINISTERS

1. The Prime Minister and her Cabinet colleagues will wish to know the current security situation in the Province arising from the Maze Prison hunger strike. This letter sets out how things stand at present and includes a forward assessment concluding with a brief outline of the Government's public relations strategy in the event of the death of a hunger striker.

The Situation in the Prisons

2. There are now 40 prisoners taking part in the hunger strike at Maze and Armagh. These are made up of the 7 original male republican hunger strikers at Maze now on their 52nd day, plus the 30 who joined on 15/16 December and the 3 republican women at Armagh who started on 1 December. The 3 Armagh hunger strikers are showing appreciable weight loss but their general condition is otherwise reasonable. The other recent strikers are not causing anxiety at present. The original seven, however, are now all showing marked deterioration; weight loss is substantial and they may be considered "fairly ill".

3. One hunger striker - McKenna - has been giving particular cause for concern. He has shown a marked and rapid deterioration of vision which is now severe and also complains of hearing loss. This has been caused by nutritional deficiency. McKearney shows similar signs though of much less severity. McKenna's chances of saving his vision, even with treatment, will get worse the longer treatment is delayed; so far he has refused this. While

/transfer

SECRET.

transfer to an outside hospital has not yet been recommended
it is ^{quite} likely to occur for one or more of the strikers in the
next few days if their conditions pose difficult medical or
nursing problems.

[4. Associated with the hunger strikes are the intensified
protest campaigns. At Maze 435 republican prisoners are taking
part in the dirty protest, 17 (16 loyalist, one republican) are
participating in the blanket protest and 144 (123 loyalist,
21 republican) are refusing to work; all figures exclude
declared hunger strikers. At Armagh 26 female prisoners (all
republican) are taking part in their dirty protest. At Belfast
a series of desultory token hunger strikes and protests continues
among a varying but generally very small number of inmates.]

5. The numerous demonstrations in support of hunger strikers
have been well handled by Police and have not caused undue
anxiety. But PIRA intend to raise the level of terrorist
violence, and demonstrations will become more impassioned when
a hunger striker dies. There are likely to be sympathetic
demonstrations within the prisons, particularly among the
Special Category prisoners. Outside the prisons, we must expect
shootings, bombs, some violent demonstrations and some barricades:
one aim will be to provoke the security forces or the Government
into an injudicious response. The Catholic community has not
yet swung behind the Provisionals, and this violence should be
relatively short lived. The Police and the Army are preparing
for this escalation and are satisfied that the situation can be

SECRET

/handled

SECRET

handled without jeopardising the RUC's growing acceptability in the Catholic community. In the south, Garda co-operation is undiminished and plans are being made to intensify joint activity on the border if need be.

Forward Assessment

6. { There is now a significant risk of an escalation in terrorist violence in Northern Ireland as the condition of the hunger strikers becomes critical. } PIRA have been preparing for both controlled terrorist activity in the Province and elsewhere and for the exploitation of the civil disorder which is likely to follow the death of a hunger striker. Security force attrition during the last year has limited PIRA's capability, but they retain the capacity to mount serious attacks on security force patrols, to assassinate members of the UDR and RUC and to stage commercial bombings; these will remain favoured tactics. The greatest effect will be in areas within easy reach of the border. Operational considerations are likely to influence the timing of attacks, which will not necessarily immediately follow the death of a hunger striker.

7. There will be an emotional reaction on the streets to the death or serious deterioration in the health of a hunger striker. PIRA have prepared to exploit this, particularly in Belfast. Loyalist paramilitaries will be preparing for this disorder, but are unlikely to become involved unless the trouble spreads, either deliberately or accidentally, into Loyalist areas.

SECRET

SECRET

Public Relations

8. If and when the first of the hunger strikers dies, their supporters outside will endeavour to capitalise on what is bound to be a highly emotional situation. They will seek to mount a major propaganda exercise to convince the world that callousness on the part of the Government is the reason for the death. The Government's public relations strategy since the hunger strike was announced has been designed to put us on solid ground in refuting that allegation. Our message must remain the same when a prisoner dies; that there is no basis for granting political status but that our humanity in relation to the prison regime is amply demonstrated. The methods for getting this message across will depend on circumstances at the time. [Thus if the Provisional IRA mount major violence and street disorders in response to a death, public attention will switch from the cause to the result and the climate in which we shall respond will be correspondingly different.] But in general, it will be an essential element of the Government's public relations strategy following a death to get responsible figures in Northern Ireland and outside to echo our message that the hunger strikers have brought this death upon themselves.

SECRET