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PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH PRISON GOVERNORS AND PRISON OFFICERS -
2.15 PM ON 24 DECEMBER 1979 AT STORMONT CASTLE

Present:

Prime Minister	Mr Kerr (Governor, HMP Belfast)
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland	Mr Hilditch (Governor HMP Maze)
Mr Stowe	Mr Hodgkinson (Chairman NI POA)
Mr Hannigan	Mr McGookin (Secretary NI POA)
Mr Irvine	
Mr Barry	
Mr Ingham	
Mr Whitmore	
Mr Harrington	

The Prime Minister expressed her appreciation for the work of the Prison Service in Northern Ireland, in the face of murderous attacks upon its members, and appalling provocation such as that at the Maze. Mr Hilditch said that the problems of the 'H' Blocks were severe, but the service was satisfied that the ending of special category status was right. Prison staff would continue to treat even the most savage criminals with scrupulous fairness.

2. Mr McGookin commented that press reporting was often unhelpful. It was necessary to recognise the political motivation of the terrorists: swift and decisive action against them was needed. Supporting this view, Mr Hodgkinson suggested that radical measures, such as those advocated by Major General Frank Kitson, should be employed.

3. The Prime Minister asked precisely what measures they had in mind. Mr Kerr suggested that the urgent need was to weed out the brains behind terrorist attacks: the men concerned were known, but the information against them fell short of conclusive proof. It was difficult for prison staffs to accept that no action could be taken. He thought members of the service would also welcome action against propaganda sheets. It was well known that Gerry Adams supported the "H Block Information Office", and Republican News and Protestant paramilitary publications libelled the prison service. Such statements should not go unanswered.

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4. The Secretary of State pointed out how difficult it was to counter such reports in a newsworthy way without risking giving further currency to malicious stories.
5. In reply to concern expressed by Mr Hilditch about the release of lifers, the Secretary of State said that nobody convicted of terrorist murders had been released on licence in recent years, and he would not be prepared to release any. Mr Hilditch pointed out that terrorists elsewhere had become respectable political figures. The Prime Minister replied that in those other cases, unlike Northern Ireland, the principle of one man one vote had not applied.
6. Mr Hodkinson returned to his members' concern about press treatment of terrorism. The Prison Officers Association had tried repeatedly to air its point of view on the BBC's "Open Door" programme, but had been refused. Those on the other side engaged in psychological warfare against the forces of law and order seemed to face no such difficulty. The Prime Minister agreed that we needed continually to improve the presentation of our case.
7. Mr McGookin welcomed the Prime Minister's recognition of the role of the 2½ thousand members of the Northern Ireland prison service. The May Report had not recognised the special problems of the service in Northern Ireland.
8. In conclusion, the representatives of the Prison Service thanked the Prime Minister for giving them so much time. The Prime Minister wished them well for the future, and commented that she hoped they would all adopt security measures recommended by the security authorities: quite apart from personal considerations, it was important to take every possible step to deny the terrorists the chance of success.

R. A. Harrington

R A HARRINGTON
Private Secretary
31 December 1979

Distribution:
Officials present
Mr Marshall
Mr Burns
Mr Buxton
Mr Truesdale

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