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PRIME MINISTER

The Cabinet will wish to know the current security situation in the Province arising from the Maze Prison hunger strike. This minute sets out how things stand at present and include 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 Prison

- 53.2. 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 six UDA hunger strikers, after six days, suspended their hunger strike this morning.) 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". One hunger striker - McKenna - has been giving particular cause for concern: as a result of vitamin deficiency he has lost his sight almost completely, though the condition may not yet be irreversible. While 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.

Forward Assessment

3. There is now a significant risk of an escalation in terrorist violence as the condition of the hunger strikers becomes critical. The Provisional IRA (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.

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Operational considerations are likely to influence the timing of attacks, which will not necessarily immediately follow the death of a hunger striker.

4. 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. The Police and the Army are preparing for this escalation and are satisfied that the situation can be handled without jeopardising the RUC's growing acceptability in the Catholic community. In the Republic, Garda co-operation is undiminished and plans are being made to intensify joint activity on the border if need be.

#### Public Relations

5. 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. With Parliament in recess, we shall need to press that hard, at home and abroad, with the media and with all the people who have taken an interest in the resolution of the affair.

I am sending copies of this minute to members of the Cabinet and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

H. A.  
17 December 1980

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