

From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

CONFIDENTIAL

NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
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Michael Alexander Esq
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17 December 1980

Dear Michael

kg. Rmt 12/14

This letter reports briefly the present position in the prisons and sets out the steps which my Secretary of State will be taking over the next two days or so with regard to presentation of the Government's case.

Seven more Republican prisoners joined the hunger strike yesterday. The totals are therefore 37 Republicans at the Maze (including the original seven on their 52nd day), three women at Armagh (on day 17) and six Loyalists at the Maze (on day six) - 46 in all.

There has been no significant change in the health of the original seven. It has been announced publicly that McKenna will continue to refuse vitamin treatment for his eye trouble. The doctors do not at present see a need to transfer him, or any of the others, to the secure wing at the Musgrave Park Hospital, but that cannot be long delayed.

We must over the next few days keep the Government's position, as set out in my Secretary of State's statement of 4 December, firmly in the forefront of people's minds, not least in the minds of the prisoners. Some confusion has been caused by an unwarranted expectation of negotiation. We need to reassert our simple message - that political status is not on offer; that the conditions that are available already go a long way to meeting the prisoners' demands; that going on with the strike, far from getting them a better deal, closes the road to the continuing process of prison reform to which we are committed. It is vital that this should be hammered home for two reasons: first, so that the community as a whole sees that the Government is both responsible and humane; and second because the prisoners may even at this late hour not have hoisted aboard what is available and the fact that they could "honourably" give up now.

Enclosed is the text of a statement my Secretary of State intends to make to camera on television for transmission in the early evening of 18 December. As the drafting note indicates the middle section directed in very simple language at the prisoners themselves will be given individually to each protestor before the broadcast is made. To avoid any accusations of back-door intrigue the text of the note to prisoners would be made available to the House, at about the same time by means of an arranged PQ.

/Immediately before

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Immediately before the Secretary of State's broadcast we would envisage that a copy of the text be shown to the Taoiseach. We would propose to set up similar arrangements to those we used on 4 December. Key figures in Northern Ireland would also be given a sight of the text of the broadcast. It would be important not to give anyone outside the prisons much advance notice lest our intention become known to the Provisional IRA leaders, whose interest lies in preventing us from communicating directly, rather than through them, with prisoners.

This brings me to the channel of communication to the prisoners and the question of mediators. Various, mostly clerical, would-be mediators have offered their services. There are two objections to this course. One is that we have good reason to know that the prisoners would not respond through intermediaries. Thus the outcome could be that the Government once committed to the "mediation" path would come under pressure to use Provisional IRA representatives. Secondly no mediator of any standing could avoid becoming in short order a negotiator. We propose therefore - subject to any further developments in the next 24 hours or so - that shortly after each protesting prisoner had received a copy of the text, it should be read over and explained in depth to the hunger strikers and some of the protesting prisoners not on hunger strike by an appropriate official. We thus aim to be seen to do everything in our power to prevent the hunger strikers dying, against a background, which is now increasingly accepted among both communities in Northern Ireland that political status is not going to be granted. If the hunger strike goes on and hunger strikers die, we hope that we shall have reduced the resulting level of support for the protests and therefore of violence. But public disorder will remain likely - and it could be serious. The Secretary of State is, of course, in close touch with the GOC, the Chief Constable and the Security Co-ordinator about this. The public relations aspect and security implications of a death (which could occur within the next 10-20 days) will be set out in a separate paper, as you have already requested, which my Secretary of State will be circulating late this afternoon as a note for colleagues to be supplemented by oral updating at Cabinet on Thursday, so that the Cabinet is in full possession of the relevant facts before the Christmas adjournment.

To summarise, Mr Atkins' intention is:-

- a. to issue to the protesting prisoners a clear, simple statement of the regime which, under existing practice, would flow from an end to their protest;
- b. to announce the statement in a Written Answer;
- c. to publicise that statement in a television broadcast;

/d. to send

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- d. to send an appropriate official to explain the statement to the hunger strikers (some of whom are now unable to read it for themselves, and may have difficulty understanding it).

There may also be a case, which my Secretary of State will explain at Cabinet, for making a statement in Parliament on Friday morning.

I am copying this to the Private Secretaries to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence, the Lord Chancellor and Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours sincerely
M W Hopkins

M W HOPKINS

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E.R.

DRAFT STATEMENT

On 4 December the Government set out clearly what is available to all prisoners in Northern Ireland prisons.

2. We hoped that this would bring an end to the protests. Two more weeks have passed. The protests continue. Those on hunger strike are two weeks nearer death.

3. Their demand for political status is not going to be granted. We share the concern of all people of goodwill that these protests and the hunger strike should not lead to deaths. To the prisoners especially, I want to say: you have made your point. The European Commission of Human Rights has considered your case. The Government has already responded. So I want to spell out, for the prisoners and their families, what will happen when the protests end.

DRAFTING NOTE: What follows will be set out in a note which will be handed to every protesting prisoner, Republican and Loyalist, before this broadcast is made.7

4. First of all, we will have to clean up the cells and get prisoners into clean accommodation. We will start at once and complete the task in a week or 10 days.

5. Within a few days clothing provided by their families will be given to them to wear during recreation, association and visits. As soon as possible all prisoners will be issued with civilian-type clothing in place of the present prison uniform, for wear during the working day. From then on, as I said in October, denim prison uniform becomes a thing of the past for all prisoners.

6. They will also immediately become entitled to eight letters, four parcels and four visits per month. We will arrange these visits as quickly as possible.

E.R.

7. Once prisons are cleaned up, the prisoners can associate within the wings of the prison blocks in the evening and at weekends.

8. We want to work out for every prisoner the form of available occupation - work, vocational training, educational training - which we think suits him best. Obviously, getting this programme organised will take a little time.

9. On the question of remission - and this will be of special importance to the prisoners' families - provision already exists for lost remission to be restored after subsequent good behaviour. We will immediately start reviewing each case on an individual basis.

DRAFTING NOTE: end of note for prisoners.

10. I have set out again the conditions which the protesters can secure for themselves now by ending their protests. I have done so because I want you all to understand that the prisoners' choice is between accepting humane conditions which meet in a practical way the kind of things they have been asking for, or dying as a result of their hunger strike.

11. We do not want prisoners to die. But we shall not let the way we run the prisons be determined by threats of suicide.

12. Northern Ireland prisons are acknowledged to include some of the best in the United Kingdom. Even so there will be opportunities in the future to improve the conditions in them for prisoners and prison staff alike. And the Government remains determined to take such opportunities whenever they arise.