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DEFENCE AND OVERSEAS POLICY COMMITTEE

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NORTHERN IRELAND: THE SECURITY AND PRISONS BACKGROUND  
Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

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1. Annex A is an account of the present situation in the Northern Ireland prisons, where the most serious current problem is the hunger strike being pursued by seven Republican prisoners since 27 October. Although they have been moved from the "dirty" cells which they were occupying before they began their fast, their medical condition does not yet give cause for concern, and will probably not do so until well into December.
2. The burdens imposed by the industrial action being taken by the Prison Officers Association fall at least as heavily on the police and the army as they do on the prisons administration but the difficulties have not yet become severe.
3. Annex B is a brief summary of the present security situation. Until the onset of the hunger strike it had been a good year for the police and the army in Northern Ireland, but public demonstrations in support of the hunger strikers, and possible Protestant reaction to these demonstrations, are likely to be a severe test for us. So far the RUC has handled the public protests with little difficulty, and without committing the army in support. The demonstrations have generally been well organised peaceful affairs confined to the Republican areas - a pattern which the

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organisers could probably sustain indefinitely. The Provisional IRA have not yet sought to manipulate the demonstrations, but undoubtedly have the capacity to do so. If the Provisionals can either stimulate a Protestant "Loyalist" counter-action on the streets, or can draw the police and army into an attitude which can later be claimed to be brutal, then the Provisionals will be able to use the deteriorating situation to recruit new members to their ranks and to broaden their support within the Catholic community. When the present peaceful campaign in support of the hunger strikers is seen not to be making ground, the organisers might well be tempted to move the demonstrations out of Republican areas and seek confrontation (with "Loyalists" or with the police) by marching along more provocative routes. This would stretch police resources severely, and the RUC are very much aware that such a development, combined with a responsible attack by "Loyalists" or a perception of brutality by the security forces against a Republican crowd could give rise to a second "cause" (in addition, that is, to the H Block protest itself) around which to rally moderate Catholic opinion.

4. There is already ample evidence that the Provisionals have not suspended terrorist activity during the hunger strike, but there is no reason at present to believe that terrorist activity alone poses any greater threat now than that faced during the first ten months of the year, during which both its police and the army have had considerable success. Whether or not there is any significant change in the security situation over the next few weeks is likely to be strongly conditioned, directly or indirectly, by developments on the hunger strike. The mood and size of the supporting demonstrations could change sharply when one or more of the hunger strikers appears to be nearing death. This will also increase the likelihood of the "Loyalists" being provoked into counter demonstrations. The Provisional IRA might also choose then to seek to reinforce the hunger strike with an intensification of terrorist attacks.

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5. I invite my colleagues to take <sup>note</sup> ~~note~~ of the situation as described above and in the annexes.

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ANNEX A

PRISONS: SITUATION REPORT

Hunger Strikers

1. Seven prisoners at HMP Maze refused their first meal at breakfast on Monday 27 October. They are all drinking water and taking salt. The seven have been selected with some care. They represent all parts of Northern Ireland - one being drawn from each county and one from the city of Belfast. They are known to be tough and dedicated. Only two are married. A back-up group of 12 prisoners has been nominated to take the place of any members of the original group who either die or drop out for any other reason.
2. For the first 10 days the seven, all of whom were "dirty" protesters, remained in their cells with three of them sharing with protesters who were eating. On 7 November all seven were moved into single cells in one wing of an H-block, which has been reserved, from the outset of the dirty protest in March 1978, to provide a clean area for prisoners who require a higher degree of clinical observation than is possible in the conditions pertaining in the dirty cells, but who do not require admission to the prison hospital. They are the only prisoners in this wing. They occupy adjacent cells, each of which is fitted with a hospital-type bed. This move makes it easier for the clinical staff to assess the prisoners' condition.
3. All seven hunger strikers are co-operating with the prison authorities. Unlike the "dirty" protesters they have not attempted to foul their cells or damage any of the furniture and fittings, and are making use of the facilities available in the wing to collect books and newspapers to read in their cells.
4. All seven are medically examined daily. Their condition is not causing concern at present. They will stay in their present cells until their condition deteriorates to the point where if appropriate medical supervision is to continue, they ought to be

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moved to the Maze prison hospital. That point will be for the prison doctors to determine: it is impossible to forecast precisely when it will occur, and it need not, of course, do so simultaneously for all seven. All are healthy men, notwithstanding the conditions in which they have been living. On past form hunger strikers' conditions can be expected to be critical after about 60-65 days.

"Dirty Protesters"

5. The "dirty protest" at Maze continues. On the first day of the hunger strike some 150 more prisoners joined the "dirty" campaign in support of the strikers. Since then the number of protesters has fluctuated a little. The biggest change was on 12 November when 12 prisoners decided to come off the protest, thereby reducing the number of dirty protesters to 492 - all Republican.

6. All the protesters have been concentrated in 4 H-Blocks. Some re-allocation of accommodation has been necessary but the position is well under control and the normal cleaning arrangements in the cells have been resumed.

Prison Officers' Industrial Action

7. The difficulties in the prisons have been aggravated by the industrial action which the Prison Officers' Association (POA) are taking. There is no dispute in Northern Ireland over meal-break allowances. The POA acknowledge that this matter was satisfactorily resolved in November 1978: their action is taken in support of their colleagues on the mainland, and consists of a refusal by the POA to accept into prisons new committals from the Resident Magistrates' Courts, new remands or return remands (ie prisoners who have been taken out of prisons into the courts to have their remand periods renewed). To meet this situation a new temporary prison (HMP Foyle) was opened in an army camp adjacent to Magilligan Prison with a capacity for about 150 prisoners. The prison is staffed by members of the RUC in support of a prison governor.

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8. The Remand (Temporary Provisions (Northern Ireland) Order 1980) was made on 29 October. The Order reflects Section 2 of the Imprisonment (Temporary Provisions) Act 1980 which extends to England and Wales only: it was not necessary to extend the other provisions of the Act to Northern Ireland. The Order enables courts to deal with remand prisoners in their absence and this has helped greatly in restricting the flow of prisoners currently on remand into the temporary prison. As a result, as at 12 November there were 50 prisoners only in custody at Foyle. Contingency plans have however been made for the opening of a second temporary prison if necessary.

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ANNEX B

SECURITY

As a mark of the continuing effectiveness of our security policy the Autumn has seen a continuing reduction in the overall level of violence in Northern Ireland, though there has been some increase in sectarian activity, mainly by the "Loyalist" paramilitaries. In 1980 so far the terrorists have had markedly less success than they did in 1979. Despite the continuance of terrorist attacks, principally by the Provisional IRA, the statistics show that these have become less frequent; that those who perpetrate them are still being arrested and charged in large numbers; and that their arms and explosives are still being intercepted in considerable quantities often in the Republic. Co-operation between the RUC and the Garda continues at a very satisfactory level.

2. Although reduced in intensity, Republican terrorist violence has continued to take its familiar course of attacks partly on the security forces, mainly part-time members, and partly on commercial property. Their capacity to bomb and shoot is being reduced, but the capacity is still there and we will continue to face occasional short-term increases in the level of violence, or "spectaculars". In response to police and army success, such terrorist activity is now concentrated in the border areas, though the situation in south-east Fermanagh has become somewhat more peaceful of late. There has been comparatively little terrorist activity in Belfast or Londonderry this year, though Belfast has been the main scene of fresh outbreaks of sectarian attacks by "Loyalist" terrorists. These have been given a fresh stimulus in recent weeks by the Maze hunger strike. There have, however, so far, been no orchestrated retaliation by Republican groups to these sectarian attacks. Nonetheless, in contrast to last year, nearly twice as many civilians as security force members have lost their lives so far this year on account of terrorism.

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3. As at the end of October 64 people in all had lost their lives and 654 had been injured as a result of terrorist violence this year, compared with, respectively, 93 and 719 at the same date in 1979. Of those killed this year, 42 were civilians and 22 were members of the security forces. There were 550 shooting attacks up to the end of October this year (623 in 1979) and 385 explosive incidents (479 in 1979).

4. The security forces have continued to make considerable inroads into the terrorists' capacity. Up to the end of October they had seized 176 weapons (260 in 1979). 26,859 rounds of ammunition (40,916 in 1979) and 1,800 lbs of explosives (1,988 in 1979). The proportionate drop in the number of arms and ammunition seizures reflects, to a large extent, the difficulties which PIRA have had in maintaining supplies. Up to the end of October 472 people had been charged with terrorist offences this year, compared with 670 in the whole of 1979. Of these, 105 people, including a substantial number of Loyalist paramilitaries, have been charged during the past 2 months, 14 of them with murder and 8 with attempted murder.

5. The Garda too have continued to enjoy notable successes. There have been several seizures of arms and explosives, as well as the arrest and charging of a number of active terrorists. There has also been the first use by the Republic, for a crime committed in Northern Ireland, of their extra-territorial legislation; although this resulted in the acquittal of those charged, the very use of the legislation is an encouraging departure which we hope to see repeated in due course. In this and a number of other ways, notably increased Garda activity within the Republic and the strengthening of their resources along the border, it is evident that the Garda are now doing much more on their own account to get to grips with the Republican terrorists. At the same time they continue to co-operate very closely with the RUC.

6. The security forces are continuing to adapt their tactics and deployments to the needs of the situation. In particular, they are continuing to devote considerable resources to the border areas.

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Extra soldiers have been sent to Fermanagh, and the RUC are strengthening manpower at a number of their stations along the border as a whole. In addition, the RUC have now established Divisional Mobile Support Units, concentrating in the border areas, and these are proving valuable in not only augmenting police numbers but also in enhancing their capability.

7. The RUC have also been making progress in extending normal policing in the urban areas. The improving security situation has also permitted a deliberate reduction in Army profile, particularly in Belfast and Londonderry (thus reinforcing the sense of normality) and three major units have been or are being moved from the Province this year. The emphasis is, rightly, increasingly being placed on the police service, which is having to expand to meet its task. There is a continuing requirement for the deployment of regular troops in the main Republican areas of West Belfast and in the border areas, but the increasing shift in emphasis from the Army to the RUC, in Belfast as in other urban areas, is being generally well received in both communities. Symptomatic of the increased acceptance of the RUC is the force's standing in the community is the sharp decline in the number of allegations by suspected terrorists and their sympathisers of ill treatment in custody or during interrogation.

8. Within Northern Ireland there is some grudging "Loyalist" acceptance that the overall situation has improved, but there has been heightened concern in some areas, notably Fermanagh, partly because violence is seen to be sustained there and partly because the different brands of Unionist politician see such areas as a political cockpit, and inflates local anxieties for political reasons. The Catholic community sees a marked improvement in security, and is increasingly co-operative with the police. But those living in the Catholic areas of the cities still see a real threat of Protestant sectarian attacks on them and are also vulnerable to intimidation by PIRA.

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