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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

28 September, 1984

MAGILLIGAN HUNGER STRIKE

Thank you for your letter of 27 September about the present position on the Loyalist Hunger Strike at HMP Magilligan.

The Prime Minister agrees with your Secretary of State that it is important for the future not to allow the hunger strike to succeed, and has asked me to underline that we do not give in to hunger strikers.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Janet Lewis-Jones (Lord President's Office), Hugh Taylor (Home Office), Colin Budd (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Richard Mottram (Ministry of Defence), Henry Steel (Attorney General's Office) and to Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

(C.D. Powell)

G. Sandiford, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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*We do not
give in to hunger strikes
Please indicate to
H NIO.*

*Prime Minister
ESP
27/9*

27 September 1984

Dear Charles,

MAGILLIGAN HUNGER STRIKE

I am writing to let you know the present position on the Loyalist hunger strike at HMP Magilligan.

2. The strike has so far involved 10 Loyalist paramilitary prisoners. It started with 2 prisoners on 20 August and the others have joined at weekly intervals since. The strike was suspended on 18 September: resumed at the weekend and suspended again on 25 September. The action is said to result from fears by Loyalist prisoners that they are at risk of attack by Republicans. There have been some 29 minor incidents in the last year but 13 of these have been attacks or threats by Loyalist prisoners on Republicans. We have no doubt that the real objective of the hunger strike, and of the paramilitary organisations on both sides of the divide, is to put pressure on the authorities to concede the separation of Loyalists from Republicans (and the separation of both from those whom the two factions regard as "ordinary" prisoners) so that the paramilitary groupings can seek to exercise control in their respective wings. The question is thus basically not one of the safety of prisoners but of authority in the prisons.

3. We face two difficulties in holding out against segregation at Magilligan. First, there are real problems for the prison Governors in integrating different groups if, after paramilitary intimidation, they are determined not to mix. Secondly, we have a situation at Maze (Cellular) prison, arising from the history of Republican and Loyalist protests there since 1976, in which there is de facto segregation. While we have succeeded in increasing the number of integrated wings, 15 are still wholly Republican and 5 wholly Loyalist. We do not regard the Maze position as satisfactory, and you will recall a minute from Mr Prior in April expressing his concern about it. The situation is being kept under review.

4. If the strike is resumed and there is a death, there could be grave public order implications - especially in the Loyalist community. The Chief Constable takes this risk seriously. The atmosphere would be wrong for any attempt at political progress.

5. With a view to breaking the impasse, Mr Scott has had discussions with Peter Robinson MP and John Carson, a former Westminster MP and now an OUP Assembly Member, who in turn have

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had a number of meetings with the hunger strikers. These have been helpful in ensuring the Government's position is understood, but we have been careful in our dealings with Mr Robinson and Mr Carson to make it clear that there is no question of our conducting negotiations with hunger strikers.

6. We have said in discussions that if the hunger strike ends we shall be prepared to consider redressing the balance in those wings at Magilligan where Loyalists are at present outnumbered by Republicans, and we will review the existing arrangements in order to consider whether there are any further practicable and reasonable steps to minimise the risk of prisoners being attacked or intimidated. Throughout the discussions, however, we have made it clear that we do not see a segregated system as the answer to any anxieties about safety.

7. Over the weekend we moved 4 of the ex-hunger strikers (the 4 who joined the protest last) back into the prison with three carefully-chosen Roman Catholic prisoners; so that the prisoners could not claim we had left them in de facto segregation or had not given proper attention to their safety. Not unexpectedly, this led to a brief resumption of the fast of all 10 ex-hunger strikers (all of whom had made substantial weight gains since last Tuesday). Acting on medical advice, the Governor then moved the 4 back to their original location near the prison hospital for medical supervision. (The other 6 were still in the prison hospital). This resulted in them all eating again - a "controlled" intake of food according to the prisoners - to maintain but not improve their condition.

8. The prisoners say that we have until early next week to produce a satisfactory response. Mr Scott issued a statement yesterday making it clear that safety measures will be reviewed but, in the Government's view, segregation would play into the hands of the paramilitaries. This may lead to a resumption of the hunger strike with all the problems that that will cause both inside and outside the prison. Dr Paisley and Mr Robinson have asked to see the Secretary of State, and this meeting will be held this afternoon.

9. The Secretary of State takes seriously the warning of the Chief Constable about possible disorder if this hunger strike were to resume and continue to the point of death. On the other hand, it seems to him important for the future not to allow the hunger strike to succeed, and also important not to take a small but dangerous step towards increasing the power of the paramilitaries in the prisons. He will continue to keep the Prime Minister informed as the situation develops.

10. I am sending copies of this minute to the Private Secretaries to the Lord President of the Council, the Home Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Defence Secretary, the Attorney General and Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours sincerely,

Graham Sandiford.

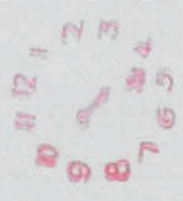
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