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13 JAN 1997

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IRISH PRISONERS IN BELMARSH

Thank you for your letter of 10 December 1996 to the Prime Minister who has asked me to reply because I have responsibility for prisons in England and Wales.

Like you, I would very much welcome an unequivocal IRA ceasefire, and one which provides the confidence that Sinn Fein genuinely wishes to move into peaceful and democratic politics. The Prime Minister again made clear in his statement of 28 November 1996 that Sinn Fein must demonstrate in its words and deeds its commitment to exclusively peaceful means in pursuing its political objectives before being invited to participate in the Talks Process.

You express concern about the treatment of Irish prisoners at Belmarsh Prison. There are, of course, a large number of prisoners with Irish nationality in Belmarsh, only some of whom have been either charged with or convicted of terrorist offences. All prisoners, no matter what their nationality, are treated in accordance with their status, as either unconvicted or convicted and sentenced prisoners and all are subject to those security procedures which are appropriate to their security category.

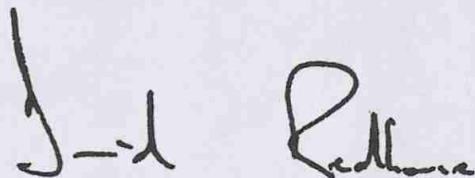
Security of the highest risk prisoners has been tightened following the implementation of the recommendations of a report by Sir John Woodcock. Sir John Woodcock enquired into the escape by six prisoners, including five Irish prisoners convicted of terrorist offences, from the Whitemoor Special Secure Unit in September 1994.

The Prison Service is fully committed to treating all prisoners humanely and the regime in the most secure unit at Belmarsh Prison fully meets this obligation. An assessment was carried out in June 1996 by Sir Donald Acheson of the Department of Public Health and Safety at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine of all the Special Unit regimes. We have acted on those of his recommendations which bore directly upon the good health of prisoners.

The regime and effects of such small secure units will be kept under regular review and the individual health of all prisoners subject to such regimes is being closely monitored.

There are several formal avenues of redress, both internal and external to the Prison Service, open to any prisoner concerned about their treatment. Details of these procedures are available to prisoners.

Yours sincerely



MICHAEL HOWARD

(approved by the Home Secretary
and signed in his absence)