

24. Mar. 1997 19:36

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No. 4393 P. 2/4

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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARYCC PB
44Prime Minister

NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

WHITEHALL

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John Holmes Esq
Private Secretary to the Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
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Dear John

You asked for an update on the find, yesterday evening, of a tunnel originating in H7 Block of the Maze Prison. This letter briefly describes the prison, the events of the last 24 hours in H7 and responds to allegations made by the Northern Ireland Chairman of the Prison Officers' Association (Mr Spratt).

On Monday 24 March there were 537 prisoners in Maze. Apart from a small workforce of 35 ordinary criminals, the remainder are prisoners convicted of or on remand for terrorist offences. There are 117 claiming affiliation to the Ulster Defence Association, 89 to the Ulster Volunteer Force, 15 to the Irish National Liberation Army and 281 to the Provisional IRA. PIRA prisoners were held in H4, H5 and H7.

On the recommendation of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons following an inspection in June 1993 that prisoners should have access to night sanitation, prisoners are no longer routinely locked in their cells. Staff presence in the wings has been reduced for security reasons, which include a high level of intimidation.

Each Block is surrounded by 4 exercise yards and prisoners spend 90% of their time in the Block or in those yards. PIRA prisoners are well organised with a command structure and considerable outside support.

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I fear this note reveals a far from satisfactory situation, where the prisoners do have a good deal more control of their own environment than is desirable, and where intimidation has ruled. No easy answers but I think it would be reasonable for me to express concerns on your behalf about what this incident has shown up. Content?

*John
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24. Mar. 1997 19:37

S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722
CONFIDENTIAL

No. 4393 P. 3/4

Recent Events in H7

At 2135 hrs on Sunday 23 March, a dog handler on regular patrol discovered a hole in the ground approximately 6 feet from the exercise yard fence and 100 feet from the perimeter fence and wall. Appropriate security precautions were immediately taken including additional patrols by the Army Prison Guard Force and enhanced security by the RUC outside the prison. Subsequent investigations revealed a tunnel approximately 2 feet square and 80 feet in length which has now been found to have originated in one of the Block cells.

The sides and roof of the tunnel were supported by items which are legitimately available to prisoners. Rubble from the excavation was contained in 3 cells including the cell with the tunnel entrance.

The Block was last searched on 28 January this year when nothing of significance was found. It is likely therefore that the excavation began after that date and Army experts are at the scene and will provide more detailed information about the mode of construction, implements used etc.

Allegations made by the Prison Officers' Association

The POA allege that prisoners are unsupervised all day and every day. In the wings close-circuit television cameras provide cover for approximately half the wing, the main concern being prisoners approaching the central administration area. When a prisoner leaves his wing, routine measures, including escorting to and from his destination eg. to the visits area or hospital, and searching where they would have come in contact with the public, are adopted.

CONFIDENTIAL

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CONFIDENTIAL

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Mr Spratt alleges that management have no coherent search policy. While it is a fact that searching at the Maze has to recognise the balance between necessary security and presenting prisoners with issues to be exploited to the detriment of the community as a whole, the Governor has developed a policy for more frequent searching and the establishment of this procedure as a routine within the prison.

Staff have referred to a policy of political appeasement towards the prisoners. Since the protests at the Maze in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a difficult balance has had to be struck between security, the regime and humaneness of treatment. This policy, while carrying inherent risks, has largely removed internal prison issues from the political agenda. In the past such issues have added to the level of violence, cost the lives of both prison staff and civilians and given considerable support to Sinn Fein.

My Secretary of State has agreed to an inquiry, to be undertaken by the Prison Service Agency under the supervision of Mr John Steele, a former Controller of Prisons in Northern Ireland and currently Senior Director, Security in the Northern Ireland Office.

Summary

The security measures in place prevented what could have been a highly dangerous escape from the Block from which prisoners escaped in September 1983. The problem of managing so many terrorist prisoners is compounded by the very high security threat they present and their proven capacity to intimidate prison officers.

Signed

W. K. LINDSAY
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