

On prisoners, the aide memoire recognised the particular sensitivity of prisoner issues on all sides. The Government is committed to ensuring that prisoners are treated with dignity and respect for their rights and subject to no more security restrictions than the risk to the public requires. This principle will naturally be applied in considering the security classification and conditions of prisoners in the Special Secure Units, in the review which would be conducted consequent on any significant diminution of the security threat. But in this context such diminution of any security threat would have to include satisfactory evidence relating to the abandonment of escape attempts by these prisoners.

As successive Home Secretaries have made clear, the Government is also committed to the principle that prisoners should serve their sentences close to their family, wherever practicable. In accordance with this principle, requests for transfer to Northern Ireland or repatriation to the Irish Republic are regularly considered.

Since April 1995, under both Governments, there have been nine permanent transfers to Northern Ireland of prisoners convicted of terrorist offences. This is in addition to temporary transfers, and six repatriations to the Irish Republic of prisoners convicted of terrorist offences since the scheme began in November 1995. In the normal course of events, the Home Office expects to announce decisions in three further repatriation cases in the coming weeks, once some prior exchanges with the new Irish Government are completed satisfactorily. A further three cases are likely to be referred to the Irish Government for their consideration this week.

The position of long-term prisoners, who have served over 20 years, and who have applied for repatriations is recognised as of particular concern. In accordance with the practice of successive Governments, the Home Secretary will shortly set tariffs for four such prisoners. This should enable early progress to be made on their applications to be transferred to Irish jurisdiction subject to the provisions of the Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons.