

Timing?

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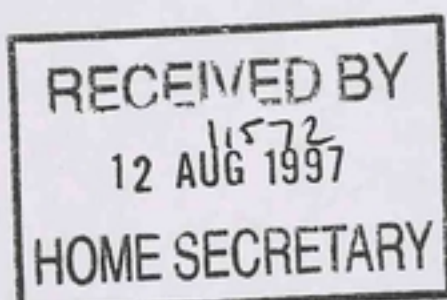
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12 August 1997

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**REDUCTION IN RISK CATEGORY PROVISIONAL IRA PRISONERS  
HELD IN SPECIAL SECURE UNITS**

Issue for Decision

Agreement to an operational decision to reduce 13 Exceptional Risk Category A prisoners, believed to be members of the Provisional IRA, to High Risk.

Timing

2. Unless Ministers indicate to the contrary, prisoners will be made High Risk on Friday 15 August 1997.

Recommendation

3. To endorse the operational decision to reduce the prisoners to High Risk.

Summary

4. The Prison Service have now completed the assessment of risk category promised in the letter dated 9 July 1997 from Quentin Thomas of the Northern Ireland Office to Martin McGuinness. The review has taken account of the changed circumstances of the Provisional IRA cease-fire. Consultation with the Metropolitan Police Special Branch confirms that the risk of a determined externally mounted escape attempt is minimal. The Prison Service operational judgement is that this justifies a reduction of the prisoners' risk category to High Risk and removal from SSU conditions.

Consideration

5. There are a total of 28 prisoners in England and Wales convicted or charged with terrorist offences and believed to be members of Irish Republican terrorist groups (full details in Annex A). Of these prisoners, 13 are currently

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categorised as Category A Exceptional Risk prisoners. These prisoners are held in Special Secure Units (SSUs).

6. The criteria for Exceptional Risk prisoners are as outlined in Annex B.
7. The SSUs provide the highest level of security, effectively being a prison within a prison. Surveillance systems in the Units are better than for ordinary accommodation in dispersal prisons, staffing ratios are higher, helicopter attack protection is more substantial and visits take place in closed conditions.
8. The claustrophobic and restrictive nature of the Units has attracted criticism from a number of sources, including Amnesty International and a variety of organisations supporting Irish terrorist prisoners.
9. Those prisoners who are held in the SSUs have been identified by the Prison Service as matching the criteria, mainly on the basis of police intelligence based advice. This advice addresses their value to their criminal organisation, the availability of organised support to assist escape and the likelihood of such an escape.
10. The criteria for High Risk Category A prisoners are as outlined in Annex B.
11. High Risk Category A prisoners are held in dispersal prisons or core locals. They are subject to additional restrictions compared to other Category A prisoners. These restrictions include specially supervised open visits and simultaneous monitoring of all telephone calls.
12. The police advice (see Annex C) indicates that, although the determination of the prisoners to escape and their value to their organisation has not changed, it is now unlikely, in the context of the cease-fire, that an armed assault would be mounted to release them.
13. As the risk of external attack was the major factor that prompted their classification as Exceptional Risk, my operational judgement is that the High Risk category is adequate. If the cease-fire should break down, or other intelligence information casting doubt on the assessment be received, their classification would be immediately re-considered.
14. Plans are being made to move the prisoners from SSUs into ordinary accommodation beginning Friday 15 August 1997. Convicted prisoners will be distributed between the four dispersal prisons which have sufficient security to hold High Risk Category A prisoners. Within the prisons the prisoners will be distributed between the available wings in order to avoid an unduly high concentration of PIRA prisoners on any one wing.
15. The policy of dispersal reduces the risk that the individual prisoners pose to security by separating them from each other and the support that they would give to one another. At the same time, the dispersal of the prisoners increases the risk



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for them as any escape activity will be reported on by prisoner informants who are found in ordinary dispersal accommodation but rarely in SSUs.

16. The unconvicted prisoners are held in the Unit at Belmarsh where both High and Exceptional Risk Category A prisoners are held. The practical effect of the downgrading on these prisoners will be to allow them to routinely have open visits. These open visits will be very closely supervised.

### **Handling**

17. The decision to downgrade the prisoners will be seen by Provisional Sinn Fein as evidence that the cease-fire is leading to desirable changes and will increase their confidence in the peace process and the good faith of the British Government.

18. The Irish Government will welcome the move as evidence of a more positive approach to the second cease-fire than they felt the British Government gave during the first cease-fire.

19. There may, however, be public and political criticism that the move is an unjustified concession to Sinn Fein/Provisional IRA and would create a risk to prison security. Recent comments quoted in newspapers yesterday reflected Unionist disquiet over remarks allegedly made by Dr Mowlam about prisoner issues including possible early releases, and their concerns about "concessions" to an unproven IRA cease-fire. It is likely that such criticism will refer to the escape from Whitemoor. This earlier escape took place during the previous cease-fire. This criticism will require careful handling because of the sensitivity of the peace process.

20. Private Office may wish to consult with Number 10 to confirm that the proposed timing is acceptable and to ensure that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is given advanced notice of the implementation of the decision.

### **Line to Take**

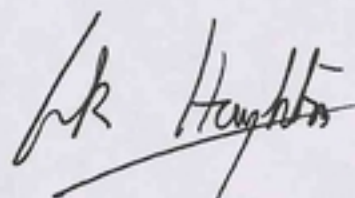
21. The decision is an operational decision; it reflects the reduced risk of an external assault on prison security during the Provisional IRA cease-fire. If the cease-fire should break down, the issue of the prisoners' risk categorisation would be re-assessed. Prison security in dispersal prisons has been improved since the Whitemoor escape. The recommendations of Sir John Woodcock's Report were implemented in full and much of Sir John Learmont's Report has also been implemented. Changes include:

- much improved searching procedures, including the use of metal detection and x-ray equipment, for all entering high security prisons;
- larger dog sections, including the provision of external motorised dog patrol whenever prisoners are out of their cells;



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- the provision of improved alarm systems and CCTV giving better perimeter security;
- a wide range of changes to security procedures throughout the prison resulting in much more reliable security systems.



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