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**QUESTION AND ANSWER BRIEFING**

**Q Who took the decision to downgrade these prisoners?**

- This was an operational decision taken at Director level in the Prison Service. It was based on advice from the police about the reduced risk of an external assault on prison security during the IRA ceasefire. Ministers were aware of the decision in advance, but it was not a political decision.

**Q Was the reclassification of prisoners promised to Sinn Fein in exchange for a ceasefire declaration?**

- No. Security classification is kept under regular review. If the ceasefire breaks down, or there is any reason to believe that the risk of an escape attempt has risen, the categorisation of these prisoners will be reviewed.

**Only if pressed**

- Sinn Fein has been told that as a matter of general principle, 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. It was made clear that this principle would naturally be applied in considering the security classification and conditions of prisoners in the Special Secure Units following any significant diminution of the security threat and the threat of escape attempts.

**Q But surely this is just another concession to Sinn Fein?**

- No. This is not intended to be a concession to Sinn Fein or the IRA. The decision was taken solely on the basis of the assessed reduction in the risk of an external assault on prison security during the IRA ceasefire. The security classification of these prisoners will be kept under review during the ceasefire.

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**Q Which prisoners does this decision effect?**

- Thirteen prisoners are to be downgraded from exceptional escape risk to high escape risk. They are all believed to have close links with the Provisional IRA. Eight are convicted of terrorist-related activities and five have been charged with similar offences.

**Q What is the difference between exceptional and high risk and why has this decision been made?**

- All exceptional risk prisoners are held within one of three Special Secure Units (SSU). SSUs are effectively prisons within prisons and provide the highest level of security possible and are designed to resist a determined external attack. With the introduction of an IRA ceasefire the likelihood of such an attack has diminished significantly and holding these prisoners in such conditions is no longer appropriate.
- Downgrading the prisoners to high risk acknowledges the fact that it is now less likely that the prisoners will receive external armed assistance to escape. It recognises, however, the dangerousness of these prisoners and as high risk prisoners they will be subject to a number of additional restrictions on movement within the prison, closer supervision of visits and of other external contacts.

**Q Are all prisoners connected with the IRA currently held in SSUs?**

- No, less than half of the prisoners believed to be connected with the IRA are currently held in SSUs.

**Q Where will these prisoners now be held?**

- All of these prisoners will still be held in one of the country's six high security prisons but they will no longer be held within an SSU. The five remand prisoners will continue to be held at Belmarsh and as high risk prisoners they will be housed in the High Security Unit which is part of the SSU complex.

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**Q     What difference will this make to these prisoners?**

- Non SSU prisoners are located in the main part of the prison along with other high security prisoners. They have access to open visits (i.e. visits which are not held behind a glass screen) but as high risk prisoners the visit will be closely supervised and monitored by camera and only approved visitors are allowed open visits. Prisoners are searched thoroughly before and after each visit. Prisoners also have access to a greater range of regime activities and contact with a wider range of prisoners.

**Q     Will the security be adequate for such dangerous prisoners? Didn't prisoners like these escape from Whitemoor and won't they try and escape now?**

- The Prison Service does not expect the IRA ceasefire to diminish the determination of these prisoners to escape. However, all of the high security prisons have been extensively upgraded since the escapes from Whitemoor and Parkhurst. Parkhurst is no longer a high security prison. The other high security prisons have undergone large scale improvements in such areas as the equipment and physical barriers in place to prevent escape, the security procedures staff follow, the levels of staffing and the training provided to staff. The Prison Service is confident that the security in place now is sufficient for this category of prisoner.

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