

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2007/116/794
Creation Date(s):	22 April 1977
Extent and medium:	9 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Access Conditions:	Open
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22nd April, 1977 Private Secretary to the
Minister for Justice,

For information.

Dear Sister Sarah,

The Taoiseach has asked me to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 13th April concerning the prisoners in Portlaoise. In reply, he has asked me to send you the enclosed copy of a statement issued recently by the Minister for Justice arising out of a number of misleading and false allegations concerning Portlaoise Prison.

The Taoiseach trusts that the Minister's statement clarifies the Government's position in this matter.

Yours sincerely,

J. MURRAY
Private Secretary

Sister Sarah Clarke,
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LA SAINTE UNION CONVENT,
HIGHGATE ROAD,
LONDON, N.W.5
April 16th 1977

Tel:
GULLIVER 4664

Dear Mr Cosgrave,

For many yeats prisoners, prisoners families and prison conditions have been my special apostolate and this letter is respectfully written to you, not to support the IRA claims, but out of concern for the prisoners, and their wardeds, and the image of my Irish catholic country. During my apostolate here, with some exceptions, the authorities have listened to our complaints and avoided confrontation.

Recently I have seen a well authenticated statement signed by a prisoner just released from Port Laoise Prison. This man was held in solitary confinement for 22½ hours daily. In solitary confinement his body was defiled several times daily in the presence of five or six warders. These so called strip searches started at 7am each morning, including Christmas Day, and because the man was in solitary confinement there could not be security reasons for defilement of this man. I expect the guards to be thorough. I myself have been present at high security searches with the relatives of top security prisoners and I have been subjected to both physical searches and searched with electronic devices. Never have I seen the person defiled. The purpose of these so called strip searches could only be to humiliate and degrade the prisoner, and this is contrary to the teaching of Christ and to article 3 of the declaration of human rights.

You are the Chief Executive of the State and I have seen you occupy a foremost position in church on occasions. I presume that you, and the warders obeying your orders go to Holy Communion sometimes. I



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Find it difficult to understand how you can receive the Body of Christ and allow the prisoners under your control to be defiled daily. The ill treatment of the prisoners relatives is particularly repugnant. I queue weekly with the relatives of some of the greatest gangsters in this country and they too are human beings. In spite of the seriousness of the crime a murderers mother said 'he is my son and I love him' This love is the criminals only salvation. I can assure you that visiting ones relatives in prison is an extremely harrowing experience under the best conditions, without the added harassments and humiliations endured by the visitors to Port Laoise prison. I may add that these conditions would not be tolerated over here.

Please Mr Cosgrave, allow the international Red Cross in to investigate the conditions in the Irish prisons. You will have every thing to gain. If there are strip searches and harassment of visitors be great and courageous enough to end them. A state that degrades even one of its citizens degrades us all. An Irish catholic state degrading one of its citizens degrades the church, brutalizes the guards and the guardians of the guards.

Yours sincerely,

Sister Sarah Clarke

Sister Sarah Clarke.

Issued by the Government Information Services,
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The following statement has been issued on behalf of the Minister for Justice, Mr. Patrick Cooney, T.D. arising out of a number of misleading and false allegations concerning Portlaoise Prison:

The subversive prisoners in Portlaoise, notwithstanding their conviction for the most serious criminal offences regard themselves as "prisoners of war" and that they have a duty at all times to try to escape.

On one occasion a number of prisoners using explosives did escape and there was, understandably, much criticism especially in the Oireachtas at the security failure. On another occasion an escape, also involving the use of explosives was thwarted with an unfortunate loss of life by one prisoner.

A woman visitor attempted to pass a quantity of explosive during a visit but was detected by a prison officer. It transpired she had smuggled the explosive into the prison concealed in her vagina.

The heels on a pair of shoes delivered to the prison for use by prisoners were suspected by a prison officer as having been tampered with. They were removed, found to have been hollowed out and to contain a quantity of explosive. Some more explosive was found similarly concealed. All shoes in the possession of prisoners had then to be examined and traces of explosive were detected on several pairs by a gelignite sniffing machine.

There are good grounds for knowing that the explosive used in the Green Street courthouse explosion was smuggled out taped to the genitals of a prisoner.

A solicitor has admitted to a disciplinary committee of the Incorporated Law Society that he attempted to smuggle out of a prison a message concealed in the flies of his trousers.

When craft work was available, prisoners smuggled tools (including Stanley knives) and materials from the crafts room.

Consequences:

- (1) General searches of the prison are carried out periodically as a security precaution. These involve, in addition to a close scrutiny of the prison premises and prisoner's belongings, a strip search of each prisoner, made necessary because of the tactic by prisoners of concealing material in the intimate parts of their bodies.
- (2) Strip searches for the same reason are also carried out on the following occasions:
 - (a) Before a prisoner leaves the prison to attend court or visit a hospital and on his return from same
 - (b) Before a prisoner has a professional visit and on his return therefrom. Professional visits are supervised as to sight only and contact can take place between prisoner and visitor.

Strip searching is distasteful for both prison staff and prisoners. It becomes even more so when prisoners resist it. It is carried out with the greatest discretion possible and the suggestion by some journalists that there is an element of perversion present is a vile and malicious defamation of a loyal body of men doing a difficult, distasteful and dangerous job on behalf of the people of Ireland.

- (3) In the visiting room (but not in the professional visiting room) a wire mesh barrier, table to ceiling high, and a

transparent perspex screen 18" high, divide the prisoner from his visitor. Experience has shown that this is the on way of preventing messages and contraband from being passed. Strip searching does not take place before or after visits in this room.

- (4) Access to craft work can only be permitted if the prisoners agree to be strip searched on leaving the crafts room. They are not agreeable to this. Without this, there would obviously be a grave security risk in permitting access to the tools and materials used in craft work.
- (5) Prisoners can associate freely during periods of recreation. They are seeking the right to associate freely at all times, - in each other cells, on landings, on corridors. This will not be permitted, for the security implications of such are only too obvious.

General:

- (1) The majority of visitors attend at the prison at weekends and this leads to overcrowding and disappointment for those visitors who fail to be admitted in the time available. The authorities have offered to the prisoners to operate a system of visits by appointment but this offer which still stands, has been refused. If accepted it would immediately rectify the position. A small number of visitors do make appointments and have no difficulty in making their visits.
- (2) Allegations of brutality or inhuman treatment are totally false and without any foundation whatever. Prisoners have outdoor recreation with facilities to play football, volleyball and handball. At indoor recreation they can play cards, chess, draughts, table tennis, watch television and have 4 pool tables. Prisoners are well bedded, well fed and warmly clothed.
- (3) A number of false allegations concerning Portlaoise have been made by prisoners and have been repeated by spokesmen, lay and clerical.

(b) That the hunger strikers are in a basement in solitary confinement.

This is untrue. There is no basement in Portlaoise. The prisoners in question have been moved to cells on the ground floor to permit of easier medical access and supervision. They occupy single cells where they are regularly visited by prison staff but visits by other prisoners are not allowed.

(c) That relatives and friends have been refused information about the hunger strikers.

This is untrue. The next of kin of each hunger striker has been written to and further communications will be sent as necessary.

(d) That the Governor had overruled the doctor's recommendation for extra clothing for the hunger strikers.

This is untrue. Without any recommendation, extra blankets, duffle coats and hot water bottles were supplied and are still being supplied to the prisoners in question.

(e) That the hunger strikers had been refused permission to wash their clothes.

This is untrue. To obviate the effort for weak men to climb stairs to the laundry, their clothes are washed by prison officers and other prisoners.

(f) That prisoners generally are placed in solitary confinement at the whim of the Governor and that the cells of such prisoners are stripped of furniture during the day with the result they have nothing to sit on and have to eat off the floor.

This is untrue. A prisoner may be kept apart from the general body of prisoners but only for calculated indiscipline. The term "solitary confinement" is itself misleading because prisoners being kept apart could at any time associate among themselves if they were prepared to do the normal chore of cleaning the cell area. They are not prepared to do this and accordingly are locked in their cells save for recreation. Furniture is

- (4) The Government having advance information of the hunger strike indicated they would not concede any of the prisoners' demands and that the responsibility for any consequences of the hunger strike would rest squarely on the prisoners concerned and on their leaders. This remains the position.

- (5) If the prisoners give an undertaking not to escape, to obey the prison rules and co-operate with the prison staff then the restrictions necessitated by security consideration can be reviewed.

- (6) The following are details of the prisoners on hunger strike:

NAME	OFFENCE	SENTENCE
Thomas Bannon.	Assault on Peace Officer	6 months' imprisonment.
Michael Brody.	Control of explosive substances	5 years' penal servitude.
John J. Carroll	Robbery with aggravation	8 years' imprisonment.
Brondan Doherty.	1. Robbery with aggravation. 2. Aggravated robbery	8 years' penal servitude.
Joseph Ennis.	Shooting with intent to murder.	12 years' penal servitude.
Martin Ferris.	Assault occasioning actual bodily harm	18 months' imprisonment.
James Ferry.	Control of explosives.	5 years' penal servitude.
Pintan Hearty	Charged with possession of firearms and use of firearms to resist arrest and unlawfully seize vehicle by force and assault Garda	
Thomas Keenan.	Charged with unlawfully seizing a vehicle by force and assaulting Garda and possession of firearms without a certificate and malicious damage.	
Sean McGettigan.	Murder (the victim was a member of Oireachtas Eireann)	Penal servitude for life.
Robert McNamara.	Robbery with aggravation.	7 years' penal servitude.
Kevin Mallon.	Attempted murder.	10 years' penal servitude.
James A. Nolan.	Robbery with aggravation.	8 years' imprisonment.
Daithi o Conaill	Membership of an unlawful organisation.	18 months' imprisonment.
Philip O'Donnell.	Membership of an unlawful organisation.	18 months' imprisonment.
Liam O'Mahony	Unauthorised possession of a firearm	2 years' imprisonment.
Daniel O'Sullivan.	Robbery with aggravation	8 years' penal servitude.
Gerard Quinn.	Possession of firearms with intent to endanger life.	4 years' penal servitude.
Seamus Swan.	Shooting and malicious wounding contrary to the offences against the Person Act, 1861.	12 years' penal servitude.
Kevin Walsh.	Robbery with aggravation.	8 years' imprisonment.