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Conditions in Long Kesh

1979

1. In the course of a visit to Northern Ireland 18-19 January, I had discussions on the Long Kesh situation with Dr. Philbin, the Bishop of Down and Connor, Msgr. Mulally and the Rev. Thomas Toner, chaplain to the prison. A number of people, including Archbishop O Fiaich and John Hume, had mentioned Fr. Toner to me as somebody familiar with conditions in Long Kesh and likely to give an objective assessment of them. In the course of making arrangements to meet Fr. Toner, who operates from the Bishop's palace, I came into contact with Dr. Philbin, who invited me to call upon him. I did so on 19 January.

2. Dr. Philbin said that it was extremely important to realise that the H-Block campaign was essentially a propaganda exercise for the benefit of the IRA. He contrasted the reaction to internment, when every window in the Falls Road had a protest poster, with the present campaign. He had seen attempted rallies in West Belfast before Christmas. The organisers had had difficulty in getting enough people to fill the width of the roadway and it was obvious that the attendance was not large enough to include even all the immediate relatives of prisoners. People knew in their hearts that the issue was an artificial one. Dr. Philbin spoke approvingly of the Government's position on Long Kesh, in particular the Taoiseach's handling of it in the RTE radio interview earlier this month, which he had heard. He was aware that the H-Block campaign was having a big impact in the U.S. He himself was actively striving to keep the U.S. Bishops from becoming involved in the issue. The British were clearly losing the propaganda war with the Provisionals on this but Dr. Philbin thought that the visit of Messrs. MacNamara, Freud and Mates the previous day might help to redress the balance somewhat.

3. Fr. Toner who appears to be in his late thirties had been described to me by Dr. Philbin as "a compassionate and fairminded man" and the impression I formed of him in the course of a long conversation agreed with this assessment. He confirmed that he has full access to the prison and that his visits, which occur several times a week, are not subject to advance notice or other conditions which would make it easy for either the authorities or the prisoners to stage-manage things for him.

4. Fr. Toner confirmed that conditions in the protesters' H-Blocks were appalling, the cells smeared with excreta and other filth. There were roughly 350 IRA prisoners on protest. About 300 others were not protesting. Conditions for these latter were very good by prison standards. The protesting prisoners sit all day in their cells which are furnished only with a mattress. They are wrapped in a blanket during the day. They wrap themselves in a towel to leave their cells, for example for a visit to the doctor. They wear prison trousers only for Sunday Mass but put on prison clothes for their monthly visit.

5. I asked Fr. Toner about the question of brutality in the prison. He said there was undoubtedly some, instancing in particular the McCloskey case (a prisoner who had an eardrum damaged). The Northern Ireland prison service had expanded very drastically and no doubt some bad eggs were recruited. If for example a prisoner assaulted a warder there was likely to be retaliation in the form of a beating. On the other hand he did not want to exaggerate this dimension. The warders worked in intolerable and nauseating conditions. He could personally vouch that many showed extreme forbearance - for example some had had excreta thrown at them and had not retaliated. Many had friendly or at least bantering-style relationships with the prisoners. There were occasional harrassments. One or two evenings previously he had complaints that the prisoners' Rosary was interrupted by a din from the prison staff. There were undoubtedly occasional incidents of violence arising from the stress under which both staff and prisoners lived. He did not believe that the violence was more than occasional. It was certainly not a sustained exercise or an attempted administrative practice.

6. I questioned Fr. Toner on various aspects of the conditions of the prisoners:

Physical accommodation: The prisoners were housed two to a cell. While they did not associate collectively the walls were thin and the prisoners had no difficulty communicating from cell to cell or across corridors. Apart from the filth the main problem was the cold. The prisoners had broken all the window panes. These had been replaced by perspex panes but the prisoners had found they could set fire to these. The authorities were now putting some kind of shield made from corrugated transparent material, along the outside

wall some distance away from the windows, but as this had the effect of diminishing the daylight in the cells, the authorities were doubtful that it might contravene prison regulations regarding access to daylight. The artificial lighting in the prison is normal. He said that the heating is maintained at a high level, but although the pipes are very hot they have no effect because of the broken windows. These also allowed rain in. Fr. Toner also mentioned that a new H-Block had just been opened. This was in good condition so far. The prison authorities had just moved most or all of the Provisional 'officers' from the other protest blocks into this - some 30 in all - but Fr. Toner was sceptical as to whether this would have any effect on the protest.

7. Condition of Prisoners: The prisoners morale was generally good, considering that they were confined almost totally to their cells. While they might have a statutory right to an hours exercise a day-(Fr. Toner was unaware of this)- this was purely theoretical because no one availed of it since it involved prison clothes. The prisoners availed freely of the ^{as} medical service - an early order from an 'O.C.' to boycott this/part of the protest was disobeyed because of a serious case (a perforated ulcer, I think) and was now ignored. Some cases of fairly serious illness have occurred but no more than was normal for a group this size. There had been things like temporary loss of appetite on the part of some prisoners but on the whole he found it surprising that the effects of the protest, in particular the cold and the lack of hygiene had not generated a greater incidence of illness. Fr. Toner could not give any assessment of the quality of the medical service, beyond the fact that he had not heard it was inadequate. In reply to a question on the use of the drug Largactil, Fr. Toner said that the prisoner in question (Creelman) had been suffering a serious nervous breakdown. He was now well again. Fr. Toner said that he understood the drug was in general medical use for cases like this. He did not think there was any abuse involving drugs in the prison.

8. Cleaning: Fr. Toner said that the steam cleaning equipment which had been in use for some time had made a big improvement in that it prevented the filth accumulating to the extent it had previously. The policy of forcible baths and haircuts where this was recommended on medical grounds had been implemented in H-Blocks 3 and 4 and was about to be implemented in 5. There had been resistance in the first

six or seven cases in H-Block 3, and this had led to injuries - he knew for certain one prisoner had had his small toe crushed. There was no serious resistance now and he had the impression that for many prisoners it was a god-send to be able to clean themselves without loss of principle. The cropping of the hair made a tremendous difference to the appearance of the prisoners. I asked about allegations that the steam equipment left the mattresses damp, and that the disinfectant had sickened prisoners. Fr. Toner said that as prisoners were rotated in cells the cells were dry before they were reoccupied. The wet came from rain through broken windows. In disinfecting corridors it was possible that some disinfectant got under doors. There had been complaints about this some months ago. He did not think it was an intentional harrassment and it was done less now.

9. Punishments: I asked Fr. Toner about punishments such as sentences of confinement to the punishment block, the cumulative effect of which could be severe. Fr. Toner said that apart from loss of remission there were two principal punishments - cellular confinement ("C.C.") and a sentence to the punishment block. Since the prisoners did not leave the cell, "C.C." was largely theoretical. When the prisoners had both beds and mattresses the mattresses were taken away for "C.C.". Since there was now only the mattress in the cell this was no longer done. The punishment block was also little different from the ordinary cells in the conditions of protest except that the block was remote from the other blocks and therefore the prisoner was unable to communicate with others. Fr. Toner said the prisoners on protest were allowed only religious reading matter since other reading material was being destroyed by the prisoners.

10. General Points: I asked Fr. Toner what changes he personally felt could usefully be made in the prison regime. He thought that the prisoners could well be allowed some non-religious reading matter - even if paperbacks or magazines were destroyed it would not represent any great loss. He felt that 'neutral' sports-wear might be made available for exercise - even if the prisoners refused to avail of it it would at least show that no stone was being left unturned to overcome the long confinement to cells which was one of the worst effects of the protest. He felt from the prison authorities own viewpoint they should allow more inspection visits

to the prison. Far from admiring the spirit of sacrifice which inspired the protest, as the Provisionals appeared to calculate, Fr. Toner felt that the reaction of any normal person was likely to be one of revulsion at the mentality of an organisation which allowed, much less encouraged, its members to engage in such a degrading and dehumanising form of protest. I asked him whether it might not be worthwhile to defuse the conflict for example by means of some kind of general exemption from prison uniforms and work for all prisoners without distinction. Fr. Toner thought it was not unreasonable for the authorities to worry about the effect that such a move might have from the point of view of IRA propaganda. There was no doubt it would be exploited. One also had to remember there were three hundred IRA prisoners not involved in the protest. These in his experience were generally the ones who had come to question or regret their involvement in violence and it would not necessarily be a good thing to allow the blanket men, as the more extreme sort of prisoner, to triumph at their expense. In this context he told me - in strict confidence - that although Archbishop O Fiaich had received requests from the non-blanket men to visit them during his visit to Long Kesh, the Archbishop had not chosen to do so. This had caused distress to the prisoners who in the circumstances understandably felt that the Archbishop was engaging in a political rather than a pastoral exercise.

11. I have given Fr. Toner's comments in some detail since I consider he is one of the very few people with extensive first hand knowledge of the situation who does not have any political axe to grind. The general impression I retained was that conditions in the prison were indeed sordid. There had been incidents of violence and harassment but almost certainly on a less frequent scale than suggested by sympathisers of the prisoners and certainly not as part of a sustained administrative practice. Within certain limits the authorities do try to mitigate the effects of the prisoners' protest. All three Churchmen I spoke to emphasised the ulterior political motives of the protest and the lack of real popular support for it and while advocating humane and sensible attitudes on secondary details were inclined to discourage any major concessions which they felt would be a vindication for hardliners in the IRA.

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