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The following comments on the situation of prisoners "on the blanket" in Long Kesh are based on a recent interview with two former prisoners one of whom had been "on the blanket" for ten months and the other for nine months.

There are now more than 260 prisoners "on the blanket" in Long Kesh. Their average age is 20 years. The average age of about half of them is 18 years.

About 80% of these prisoners were charged on their own signed statements and over 76% were found guilty because the courts accept the evidence of the prosecution. Many of those who signed these statements would say they signed under duress.

Living Conditions There are two prisoners in each cell although the cells were built to accommodate one prisoner. Having a cell-mate is a mixed blessing. He can provide company but because of the close and continual confinement and the fact that you cannot choose or change your cell-mate, it is not always an advantage. The prisoners tend at times to get on each other's nerves.

The prisoners are locked in their cells for 24 hours a day except for a few minutes "slopping out" time in the morning when two prisoners at a time go to empty their pots. It is alleged that sometimes all the prisoners don't get slopped out within the time allowed and that when this happens they have to keep their unemptied pots in their cells for another day.

A basin of water is brought to each cell after slopping out for washing. The prisoners could go to wash-basins outside the cells for washing and shaving but they are allowed only one towel and as they use this to cover themselves they would have no towel for drying themselves. They have asked for a second towel but they have been refused. They refuse therefore to use the washing facilities outside the cells. Most of them grow beards because of the lack of proper facilities for shaving. They are allowed one tube of tooth paste every seven weeks.

The longest time outside the cell is Mass time

on Sundays, about 45 minutes.

The prisoners do not get any exercise except what they can do in their cells. Those who try to do physical exercises in their cells find that they are very exhausted after a short time and so the tendency seems to be not to do such exercises. The reason for the exhaustion is lack of fresh air and lack of normal exercise like walking. Also there is really no room in the cells for doing physical exercises properly.

The reading of religious books and magazines is the only occupation allowed to prisoners "on the blanket". "The Word" seems to be the most popular magazine and "Reality" the second most popular. Prisoners on protest are not allowed cigarettes, tobacco, newspapers, radios, any kind of games and no books or magazines except the religious books and magazines.

Visits are allowed once a month. To take a visit the prisoner must put on prison clothes. The visit lasts half an hour. Because of the objection to wearing prison clothes, some prisoners are unwilling to take visits or take them only at irregular intervals.

Letters are now allowed once a week. This is a recent concession which seems to have run into difficulties in the last few weeks (March '78). It is alleged now that to hand a letter to a prisoner officer or to receive one from him the prisoner must stand up and address the prisoner officer as "Sir". According to the allegations, the refusal to do this means that letters are not sent out or received. This problem concerning letters is at present causing a great deal of tension both inside and outside the prison.

Regarding meals: Dinner is at 12.45 p.m., and tea at 5 p.m. with a cup of tea at 7 p.m. Comments on the food are adverse, "cold", etc. The thin slices of meat are described as "blotting paper". There seems to be little variety and the quantity is "usually not enough". The reason why the food is cold is because it has to be brought around the cells. It is alleged, however, that sometimes at least the prison staff delay the distribution of the food, for example, by leaving the food for the prisoners sitting there while they take tea themselves.

Regarding toilet facilities:

Regarding toilet facilities: This normally means a pot in the cell used by both prisoners. It is possible to get out to the toilets but permission seems to depend on the attitude of individual prison staff. A bell is used to attract the attention of prison staff and the allegation was made that one prisoner who rang the bell a number of times to use the toilet, was given a punishment of time "on the boards", for "improper use of government property".

Regarding health: Prisoners "on the blanket" suffer constant or at least frequent psychological mental strain which could have bad effects in the long run. It seems prisoners often feel like screaming or letting off steam by banging furniture around the cell. One of the prisoners interviewed (released after ten months on the blanket) said he felt it difficult to mix with people and had a tendency to be withdrawn into himself. He felt the urge to go away and sit by himself. The other former prisoner (released after nine months on the blanket) said that on one occasion he went into a long trance and sat staring at a wall while people tried in vain to bring him out of the trance. On another occasion he suddenly felt dizzy in public and began to smash up the place until he finally fainted.

The attitude to the medical treatment available to the prisoners is one of dissatisfaction. It is alleged that tranquilizers are a common form of treatment. It is also alleged that when the prisoners complain that the treatment is not helping they are told that if they want full medical or specialist attention they must put on prison clothes. This may mean medical or specialist attention outside the prison. It is difficult to ascertain the truth of this allegation because no case of a prisoner being refused attention has been quoted.

Colds are the most common form of illness and once they are contracted they are difficult to get rid of because of the run down condition of the prisoners. Skin rashes and dandruff are also common ailments due, it seems, to lack of fresh air and lack of proper nutriment. One prisoner who was nine days "On the boards" got frost bite. Pains in legs, joints, elbows, shoulders are also common apparently because of the lack of exercise. Eyesight complaints are also alleged - this may be due to the glare of lights on the white walls of the cells and short

range of viewing all day every day. Cold and bare feet may lead to kidney complaints, arthritis, rheumatism.

Regarding dental treatment: It is alleged that a few months may pass between the request for an appointment with the dentist and the actual appointment.

Regarding the conduct of prison officers: Allegations and complaints were made about the misconduct of prison officers, for example, allegations of beatings, slappings and messing prisoners about in various degrees. It was alleged that the young prisoners "on the blanket" were especially subject to harassment "to break them". There were also allegations about bad and abusive language, expressions like "fenian bastards". Around July 12th the bigoted attitudes of some prison officers became apparent, it was alleged.

If prisoners sought redress or made complaints about the misconduct of prison officers they were in danger of being 'got at', for example, they were in danger, it was alleged, of being put on a charge of "swearing at a prison officer" or some other charge and then put "on the boards".

Allegations were also made about prison orderlies. Some of them were accused of threatening prisoners, of striking them or of interfering with their food. If orderlies were friendly to the prisoners they were moved elsewhere.

To entertain themselves the prisoners hold concerts, quiz competitions - even debates. They do this by standing at the doors of their cells and shouting; they also say the Rosary in this way. It seems now that this type of communication has become more difficult, if not impossible, because the "crack" between the door and the door jamb, through which the prisoners shouted and through which they could see, has been covered with a metal strip. Once at least when the prisoners were saying the Rosary, there was a lot of noise made apparently by banging and rattling doors with batons. It is also alleged that Rosary beads and Mass missalettes have been confiscated.

Regarding the punishment cells: There are 28 of them, one padded. The furniture is a wooden bed and pillow and chair and "pot" (it is alleged that the pot has no lid). It is also alleged that there is no heat worth talking about in the punishment cells and that the only ventilation is through a pipe in the wall. The prisoners cannot see out of the punishment cells. Mattress and bedclothes are brought in at night. There is no reading material but a copy of the Bible is provided.

It seems that some blanket prisoner or prisoners are sent to these punishment cells every day. It is also alleged that frequent punishments "on the boards" are handed out for trivial and sometimes false offences. One was put "on the boards" for making chess men out of toilet paper. Another was sent there for three days because the fly leaf of his Bible had been removed although he denied the charge and pointed out that others had been in the cell before him - the charge "damaging government property". One prisoner was sent to punishment because he complained that he did not get a clean towel one week; another for ringing the bell to go to the toilet, (charge "misuse of government property"). Some prisoners have been given as much as 15 days "on the boards".

Regarding the board of visitors: There seems to be little confidence in the board of visitors among prisoners "on the blanket". It was pointed out that only one of them, a doctor from Lurgan, had ever made any public comment on the situation of the prisoners.

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