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COMMISSION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE

The persons named in the attached brief called today on the Taoiseach. Mr. Gallagher, who acted as Chairman, of the group said that they were in close touch with the Irish Council of Churches and were, therefore, not speaking simply of a Catholic position. They had, in recent days, received certain indications which showed that the present might be a time for a new initiative.

Father Crilly said that he was a relation of a person who had died on hunger strike, of another person who was at present on strike and of a third who was about to go on strike. He could, therefore, speak with some knowledge of the subject. He then referred to the statement, in the attached telex, which was handed to the Taoiseach and said that their reading of the statement was that the prisoners were now looking for some way out of the present impasse. There was no word about political status in the statement. There was, of course, varying degrees of openness as between the different prisoners. Some would look for the five demands; others would look for less. Among the families, however, there was a far greater sense of urgency. They were becoming extremely anxious and looked for positive action.

The Taoiseach said that he had not found that. Reactions could vary. The mother and father of Bobby Sands had been extremely concerned to get their son off the strike. His sister had, on the other hand, taken a different line. The essential question was how to be sure if some moves were made that there would be reciprocation on both sides. He then went on to say that the statement did not point to a desire for settlement but to negotiate with the British Government. Father Cilly said the statement referred to the "welcome of the prisoners for the "anxiety of the Commission". He thought there was a combination of factors pointing to the present being an opportune time for an initiative. Mr. Logue said that timing was of the utmost importance. There was not going to be a respite like this again. Both sides thought there was a risk in indicating any willingness to move. The British had exactly the same view. But both sides are prepared to say now that they are "interested". There was a new set of families involved and the British should be encouraged to act within the next three or four days. They are extremely suspicious of the present moves. They ask why the present should be regarded as being a favourable time. The elections in the South had gone far above expectations, insofar as they were concerned. Similarly, Fermanagh had far exceeded expectations. The

Handwritten notes:
 H.A. ...
 (copy sent to M. ...)
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answer to this was in three parts -

- First, they were afraid that the families would break with the present hard-line attitudes;
- Secondly, there were diminishing returns, insofar as publicity etc. was concerned, and
- None of the prisoners really wanted to die when they didn't know what the consequences would be.

They had suggested to the N.I.O. that the approach on the crucial question of association should be that the law inside the prison should be exactly the same as the law outside. The N.I.O. had seemed interested. They could say, if this rule applied, that the law of the land operated throughout the land.

The Taoiseach said that the British seemed to regard the present strike as the last throw by the I.R.A. The ~~news~~ ^{news} that the prisoners were willing to consider new moves was news to him. Father Crilly said that what he had been describing was not a matter of words but of mood. The decision to go on strike or to come off it was a decision for all the prisoners collectively - not for those on strike alone. Since the strike had started treatment in the prisons for all prisoners had been much better. This was a consideration that should not be forgotten. If the strike were to end, the end would have to be on such conditions as guaranteed prisoners against isolation, beatings etc. This was one of the reasons why association played such a big part in their case.

Fr. Crilly went on to say that he agreed with Bishop Daly of Derry that the more the strike was held down in the prison the more its consequences built up elsewhere. This affected not only the Catholic population in the North but also the degree to which contacts were being established in the South. The longer the strike goes on, the more this effect will continue and expand. The Taoiseach agreed. He said that this was a consequence which the British did not seem to appreciate. He said that he thought that if the British formed the view that the prisoners were ready to move they too would move but they would not get themselves into a position where they appeared to be negotiating with the prisoners. Fr. Crilly said that what was needed was some intermediary. The Taoiseach said that the British did not help the situation by repeating the phrase "political status". The prisoners had, for some time, now, not mentioned this wording.

Mr. Logue emphasised that if McDonnell died then a new conveyer belt would be starting. The Taoiseach said the

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real difficulty was to establish a system of communication with the prisoners or their representatives. He enquired as to whether Fr. Crilly had any difficulty in getting into the prison. Fr. Crilly said that he had not. He could talk at any time to McFarlane, on an ecclesiastical visit. Mr. Gallagher said that they wished to emphasise that there seemed to be more hope now than ever. It would be a pity to miss the opportunity. Mr. Logue mentioned that his contact in the Northern Ireland Office had expressed great concern about the sort of effect the strike was having on the Catholic community in Northern Ireland and was anxious that some moves to counter this be undertaken. The Taoiseach mentioned the British interpretation that any concession by them would open the way for salami tactics. Mr. Logue said that the Prime Minister seemed to have taken a personal interest in the matter. She seemed to have taken the issue out of the hands of the Secretary of State. The Taoiseach said that time was needed to consider what should be done. Contact would be maintained. He thanked the delegation for their visit.



18th June, 1981.