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S.20574

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Issued early June 1981

CODE

87 CLEAR

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TO London

FROM H.O.

FOR Ambassador

FROM Asst. Sec. Neligan

REF: YOUR/ MY

SUBJECT

With reference to the two preceding messages, the following are intended as briefing and guidelines for reply to questions in connection with the presentation of the message to Mrs. Thatcher.

1. The basic assessment here is that the political and propaganda gains made by the IRA since the present phase of the hunger strike started on 1 March exceed any gains that might have been made by them if special status had been in substance granted straight away. The IRA has exploited the deaths of hunger strikers and the bereavement of their families to develop wide-spectrum propaganda drawing on both potential supporters of violence and also on those whose humane sympathy they can touch.

2. These consequences are now so serious that they outweigh all other considerations. The British Government may believe that they can win the H-block "battle" but they are losing the war all about them in the process. We are losing too.

3. Point one in the message can be justified by reference to the district election results in N.I. and to the huge crowds at hunger-strikers' funerals, etc..

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FROM TO _____

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FROM _____ EXT _____

REF: YOUR/MY _____

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SUBJECT _____

4. Point two: future developments which can be foreseen here include the deaths by hunger strike of a T.D., with all the emotions which that would arouse, and a bye-election giving the opportunity to the IRA to put another prisoner on the ballot with all the propaganda openings that implies.

5. Re point three, you might appropriately also use the argument we put to Figg yesterday, namely that while responsible opinion abroad (e.g. reputable newspaper comment) certainly supports the withholding of political status from the prisoners, it also points to the real political problem of N.I. and calls for a political solution. The search for this cannot realistically be begun before the prison issue is got out of the way.

6. Reasons for considering the present time appropriate for a new effort to solve the problem:-

(i) A lull in the incidence of deaths by hunger strike, which may not be repeated when the present strikers begin to die in July.

(ii) Responsible sources give indications that the state of tension between the prisoners, their families and their outside associates is such that the present could be a suitable time. Families in particular are anguished and perplexed.

These are the circumstances which are unlikely to recur.

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FOR _____ FROM _____ EXT. _____

REF: YOUR MY _____ - 3 -

SUBJECT _____ *following*

7. The two paragraphs concerning possible ways forward are inspired essentially by the recommendations of the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, the text of which has previously been sent to you.

(paraphrase)
8. The following paragraph constitutes the essential request that an effort be made. As we suggested to Figg yesterday, if at the policy level it were accepted by the British side that action is needed to arrest the IRA's political and propaganda gains, the means of making progress in the prison would surely be found. Acceptance of the need for action ought therefore to be our first aim rather than the detailed recommendation of particular means.

9. Re the last sentence, you may be asked whether our offer of help would include the making by the Taoiseach of a public statement on the issue. In that event you should indicate..... ✓

10. If you have further questions about this demarche, please telephone the Taoiseach personally *if you wish*. Subject to that, it is desired that you see the P.M. as soon as possible. ✓