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Letter from Taoiseach to British Prime Minister 10 July 1981

I am writing to you to express the Irish Government's deep concern about the impact of recent developments in the hunger strike at the Maze Prison upon the situation in our country.

Since the first deaths in the hunger strike we have had to contend with the political problem of rising levels of sympathy for the prisoners. The General Election results of last month showed this growth very clearly when two imprisoned candidates were elected to Dail Eireann. This is a development which directly threatens the stability of our state through the intrusion of interests which would never have been lent such formal authority but for the propaganda effects of the confrontation in the Maze.

There is now an additional major problem. People here find the statement of 8 July of the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace to be a credible account of the Commission's meetings with Minister of State Alison on the one hand and with the hunger strikers on the other. As a Government we too are persuaded by this account and so are unable to do or say anything to counter the lack of public confidence in the British Government's handling of the situation. We are thus faced with the danger of a serious and progressive deterioration in bilateral relations.

Up to the present, the Irish Government have always supported the position that political status should not be given to prisoners duly sentenced for serious crimes, and so have avoided any appearance of taking the side of the hunger strikers. In these last few days, however, the deplorable situation has been reached that the points of view of the Government and the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace are seen to converge with that of the Provisional IRA in criticism of your authorities' handling of these events. This is naturally the last position in which we would wish to find ourselves.

The state of public opinion now emerging can only have a bad effect on our internal security situation, though we are determined to maintain an undiminished effort in this area. British security forces in Northern Ireland have up to now been able to rely on the effective cooperation of our security forces, as has been acknowledged from time to time by British spokesmen. As both Governments know, the effectiveness of security measures depends on the prevailing climate of local public opinion.

Even before this latest development we had to face a broad spectrum of I.R.A. propaganda which proved sadly effective in appealing simultaneously both to those who are inclined to violence, and to people of humane sympathies genuinely moved by loss of life and bereavement of families. Looking into the immediate future we face the prospect of the death of a hunger striker who is a member of our Parliament. As you know from the case of Mr. Sands, the propaganda potential of such a death would be immense, in our society, in Britain and throughout the world.

It is against this background that I urge you, without any more loss of time, to accept the detailed description of a possible future prison regime set out by the I.C.J.P. on the basis of contacts with the N.I.O. as the foundation of a solution of the crisis. In this connection it is important to recall that in their statement issued last weekend, the prisoners said that they were not seeking differentiation from other prisoners or concessions that would involve surrender by the authorities of control of the prison.

I would not wish this message to be interpreted as in any way suggesting that the difficulties created by the hunger strike should ultimately be laid at any door other than that of the IRA. I believe, however, that an end to the hunger-strike will deprive them of their most potent weapon and restore a climate in which our efforts can again be directed to more positive and constructive endeavours, in pursuance of the process initiated in Dublin last December, to the continuance of which I attach great importance.

Yours sincerely,

Garret FitzGerald
Taoiseach