

P2104/2/81 (7)

MEMORANDUM

1. From July 16 to July 22, 1981, three delegates of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) carried out visits to the following prisons in Northern Ireland in order to assess the detention conditions prevailing there : the Maze (cellular and compounds), Crumlin Road (Belfast), Armagh and Magilligan. Altogether, 2184 prisoners were visited in these four prisons. The delegates were given all the facilities normally required for such visits; in particular, they could talk to prisoners without any witness present. Set out below are the ICRC's principal conclusions and recommendations following this series of visits.

2. With the exception of those blocks at the Maze prison which house protesting prisoners, the purely material detention conditions are on the whole quite satisfactory. The delegates received no major complaints regarding such matters as accommodation, hygiene, medical care, food or clothing. Certain facilities accorded the prisoners, such as the industrial and vocational training workshops at the Maze and Magilligan prisons, and the education courses offered in all prisons, are of an exceptionally high standard.

3. Some of the detention conditions prevailing in those blocks of the Maze prison housing protesting prisoners are harsh. But, as the prisoners' deprivations there are either self-imposed or due to the withdrawal of privileges following their protest-action, and as, moreover, the prisoners refused to discuss their detention conditions with the delegates, the ICRC is in no position to make practical recommendations for their improvements to the detaining authorities.

4. There is overcrowding in the blocks of the Maze (cellular) prison because many of the single cells are occupied by two prisoners. In the conforming blocks, this has led to excessive crowdedness and noise in the recreation and hobby rooms during association time.

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The ICRC recommends that solutions be found as soon as possible to allow the prisoners a more normal and satisfactory use of these facilities.

5. In all the prisons visited, the delegates heard numerous complaints and expressions of anxiety about the actual or potential integration of Republican and Loyalist prisoners in the same wing. Prisoners feared that such integration could lead to serious clashes between individuals or groups belonging to different factions. In the Crumlin Road Prison, this fear had even led the remand prisoners to impose segregation in the recreation areas and dining halls on themselves. As a result, one or the other faction remained in their cells for 23 hours out of 24 every other day.

On purely humanitarian grounds, the ICRC recommends that whenever prisoners belonging to different factions wish to be segregated from each other, they be allowed to do so in order to reduce tension and anxiety.

6. While the ICRC carried out its visits, Republican prisoners at the Maze (cellular) and Armagh prisons were engaged in a protest action against the detaining authorities. The prisoners at Armagh refused to work, the prisoners at the Maze refused to work and to wear prison-issue clothing, and eight of the latter were on a hunger strike. Six other prisoners had already died as a result of their hunger strikes in the previous months. These protests were carried out in support of five demands which the prisoners had made to the detaining authorities concerning the wearing of personal clothing, association between prisoners, the refusal to engage in certain kinds of work, the number of visits, letters and parcels a prisoner could receive, and the restitution of remission lost as a result of protest actions.

It appeared that the issue of their five demands and their protest actions, in particular the hunger strikes, was of overriding concern to the prisoners and had created a climate of tension and psychological stress in the Maze prison as well as, to a lesser degree, in the other prisons. Motivated by humanitarian concern for the hunger strikers and by the fact that the prisoners' five demands had a direct bearing on detention conditions, the ICRC delegates initially tried to determine whether they could be useful intermediaries between the prisoners and the detaining authorities in reaching any agreement on the issue. Several proposals were made to both sides concerning the form in which such an agreement might be arrived at, but none of these were acceptable to both. Having come to the conclusion that they could not be useful intermediaries, the delegates then abstained from entering into any discussions on the substance of the prisoners' five demands and proceeded with the work of assessing prison conditions which had been their objective from the outset.

Having studied closely both the detaining authorities' and the prisoners' public statements regarding the five demands, and having taken into account also the informal comments on these which were made to its delegates by both sides during initial contacts, the ICRC is of the opinion that only minor differences exist between their respective positions as far as the substance of the five demands is concerned, but that a major difference exists regarding the form in which agreement on the substance might be reached. The prisoners in fact insist on discussing the issue directly with the detaining authorities, whereas the latter refuse any direct negotiation with the prisoners and are only prepared to issue clarifications of their previously published statements on the issue.

The ICRC is not concerned with the reasons for this difference of views regarding the form of any discussion. But, as a humanitarian organization, it is preoccupied by the prolonged tension and the risk of further deaths of hunger strikers which it entails. It therefore urges both the detaining authorities and the prisoners to spare no efforts in their search for a solution to these problems and, in particular, for a constructive means of communicating with each other. The ICRC remains at the disposal of all concerned to act as a humanitarian intermediary.

7. The ICRC is at present preparing detailed confidential reports on its prison visits in Northern Ireland, containing its assessments of detention conditions prison by prison, which it will transmit to the British Government as soon as possible. And, in response to the offer expressed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in his statement of July 15, 1981, the ICRC intends to repeat its prison visits in Northern Ireland in due course.

Geneva, July 30, 1981.