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ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

Confidential

Note of call by Mr. Staples, British Embassy and phone
call from Mr. Alexander, Private Secretary to the British
Prime Minister

By prior arrangement with the Secretary to the Government who had another engagement, Mr. J. Staples of the British Embassy called to me at 5.45 p.m. on Friday, 9th January, 1981 in order to hand over the statement on the H-Block protest which is annexed to this note. I had been aware that he was coming to me directly from a previous call on Mr. D. Neligan, Assistant Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs who had been instructed to convey to Mr. Staples the adverse reaction of the Taoiseach to the apparent briefing of certain British newspapers about aspects of security co-operation.

Mr. Staples handed me the statement. He said that it was being issued that evening by the Northern Ireland Office and would be "on the wires". His authorities had therefore wished us to have it. He said that its contents answered questions put by Mr. Nally to the British Ambassador when he called on him on January 7th. It indicated the number of prisoners who had come off the protest since the end of the hunger strike. He recalled the procedure to be followed at that stage, as indicated in the Secretary of State's statement of 19 December, with particular reference to the first step being the moving of prisoners to new cells. It had been hoped that the prisoners would not foul these cells and that further steps in the envisaged procedure could then follow. Regrettably these hopes had not been validated. All the prisoners on the dirty and blanket protests had now been moved to new cells but they had again proceeded to foul them. Notwithstanding this setback, the prison Governor would shortly, as indicated in the statement he had given me, be moving a further group of protesters into different cells, all of which had been cleaned and some of which would be fully furnished. The British authorities were taking this step unilaterally, without any reciprocal response from the protesters. It was intended to be an earnest of good faith on the part of the authorities and of their readiness to carry through the procedures set out in the statement of 19th December when protesters came off the protest.

Mr Nally

The Taoiseach

may wish
to see

him

12.1.81

Mr. Keenan
Thank.

13.1

Mr. Murray
him

13.1.81

Mr. Hurley
Mr. Harte

S20574

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It appeared, however, that there were "hard men" among the prisoners who wished to wring further concessions from the authorities. They now had information that a further hunger strike, to commence in a few weeks, was to be undertaken by a group of prisoners led by Sands, for the original five demands of the protesters.

He referred to a suggestion conveyed to Ambassador Figg by Mr. Nally that Father Maher might again be used as a channel of communication. He said that it was the perception of his authorities that Father Maher had been trapped into simply conveying the extreme demands of the prisoners to the authorities. In these circumstances, they did not feel able to use him and proposed to use Father Toner and Murphy and other channels.

I commented that if a further hunger strike were to happen, it would clearly be a matter of the gravest concern to the Irish Government and expressed the hope that it could be averted. On the new step he had mentioned, i.e. moving protesting prisoners to clean and furnished cells, I said there must be some doubt as to whether it would do enough to establish confidence. I indicated that while I had not been closely involved in more recent exchanges on this issue, I had the impression - although there might be problems about defining when the protest had been ended - that the British authorities had not in fact followed through on one aspect of Mr. Atkin's statement of 19th December i.e. that "Within a few days, clothing provided by their families will be given to any prisoner giving up their protest so that they can wear it during recreation association and visits."

I had understood this to be presented as an interim measure pending availability of work and of the civilian type clothing to be issued. There seemed to be a question that, possibly because this latter clothing had become available sooner than expected, the procedure outlined had not happened and that instead prison issue clothing had been offered, albeit I had seen references to such clothing being personalised.

Mr. Staples responded that if there were any suggestion that the British authorities had not done what they said they would in Mr. Atkin's statement of 19th December, he would have to disagree. The statement he had given me dealt, he thought, with this aspect although he was unable to identify the precise reference. The difficulty might indeed relate

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to defining when the protest had ended.

I noted that the third indent of paragraph 5 of the statement he had given me appeared to indicate that prisoners who had come off the protest had been allowed to obtain clothes from their families, to be worn during recreation and visit periods.

In relation to what he had said about Father Maher, I said that I was not in a position to comment but would simply note and report what he had said.

I then referred to the fact that he had come from a previous call by Mr. Neligan who, I knew, was to raise with him apparent briefings by British sources on aspects of security co-operation. He confirmed that this matter had been raised with him. I, for my part, said that the Taoiseach had been intensely irritated by the newspaper stories in question and would be particularly perturbed, if as appeared likely, they reflected briefing by British security sources. Mr. Staples agreed that it would scarcely be accidental that similar stories could appear simultaneously in three newspapers. On the other hand it had been rightly pointed out on our side that there were a number of inaccuracies in the reports; this suggested that the source was not a particularly good one. He could only say that he had taken note of what had been said on our side and would institute the necessary inquiries.

Following a wry reference to the events surrounding the allocation of the portfolios in the new European Commission to the effect "that we could have done without that", Mr. Staples then withdrew.

As soon as he had left, a phone call came through from Mr. Michael Alexander, Private Secretary to the British Prime Minister, Mrs. Thatcher. He was aware that Mr. Staples had called on me and said that he wished to refer to three subjects.

The first was the situation in the Maze Prison. Having established what I had been told by Mr. Staples, he told me that they had heard information that an announcement would be made on Monday, 12th January, by or on behalf of the protesting prisoners, that a further group of prisoners, led by Sands would commence a further strike within a few weeks, (3 weeks, he understood), more or less in support of further concessions relating to the

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original five demands. It was the British assessment that to grant the further concessions would be to concede, in essence, treatment as political prisoners. This they were not prepared to do.

He said that their perception of Father Maher's position went somewhat further than Mr. Staples had indicated. They considered, that whether advertently or inadvertently, he had run the risk of getting into a position where he would be the instrument by which the prisoners would set up a negotiating position which the British authorities would not countenance. They therefore would not use him but proposed to use Fathers Toner and Murphy as channels of communication, not negotiation.

I told Mr. Alexander that I would convey what he had said to the Taoiseach.

He asked me also to convey that the Prime Minister greatly appreciated the message sent by the Taoiseach in respect of the bomb threat to her.

On a third subject, he said that the Prime Minister greatly regretted what had happened in respect of the allocation of portfolios in the new European Commission. She was particularly sorry that a widespread public perception had been of a clash between the British and Irish Commissioners.

What had happened, as the British saw it, was that some of the existing Commissioners had succeeded in expanding their portfolios, thus reducing the scope for the incoming Commissioners. As the British had seen it, the proposal made by Mr. Thorn involved a reduction in the portfolio of only one of the sitting Commissioners. Moreover, it was particularly regrettable that the idea had been put forward without any prior notice to Mr. Tugendhat. It was this aspect, in particular, that had led Mrs. Thatcher to phone Mr. Thorn. They wished it to be understood that her action in doing so did not involve or reflect any Anglo-Irish difficulty but arose from the factors to which he had referred. The matter now appeared to have been resolved satisfactorily and they hoped that the new Commission would now work harmoniously.

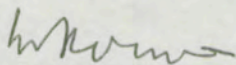
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I responded that we had certainly noted how some existing Commissioners, in particular ^{the} ~~Vico~~ Davignon had been able to expand their remits and that, as regards the matter to which he (Alexander) had referred, it was unlikely that any lasting damage had been done. I undertook to convey what he had said to the Taoiseach.

The conversation terminated at this point. I then reported to the Taoiseach. I also mentioned to Mr. Kelly, Head of the G.I.S. the statement being issued by the British and gave him a copy. I suggested that if any requests for comment were received on it from the media, the response could be that these were matters between the prisoners and the British authorities. I also told him, stressing the confidentiality of this information, of the threat of a further hunger strike but indicated ~~that~~ news of this was unlikely to break before Monday. If it did break earlier and led to requests for comment, it would suffice to say that any such development would clearly be a matter of the gravest concern to the Irish Government.



W. Kirwan,

10th January, 1981.

Copies for Taoiseach
 Mr. Nally
 Mr. O'Rourke, D/Foreign Affairs
 Mr. Ó hAnnracháin
 Mr. Neligan, D/Foreign Affairs
 Mr. Kirwan.