

1978

H BLOCK

The care and
welfare of
prisoners in
Northern
Ireland



The stated policy of the British Government is that there will be no amnesty for prisoners in Northern Ireland. If one accepts that the British Government is as sincere in this belief as they are in every other part of their Irish policy, then the prospect is that THOUSANDS OF RELATIVES WILL BE GOING TO SEE HUNDREDS OF PRISONERS ON PROTEST IN THE YEARS 2005 OR 2010. These poor people will be from the deprived areas of Belfast and Derry. To leave these people without hope for the next 25 or 30 years is not a recipe for peace.

The problem of prisoners is the problem of Peace. In the North of Ireland at the moment there are approximately 2000 Republican or Catholic prisoners - both these words are loose descriptions of large groups of men - and about 800 Loyalist prisoners. For every prisoner one can count ten or maybe twenty people, relatives, friends, neighbours. The problem therefore can include as many as 60,000 people drawn mainly from certain small clearly defined areas which are often areas of underprivilege and poverty. A very combustible mixture, one can see and when one considers the widespread suspicion of the processes of law and order - the allegations that brutality of one kind or another was used in extracting signatures to statements, then the mixture can often catch fire with regrettable consequences for the community at large.

It is impossible to see how peace can be established without some solution being found to the problem - the existence of such a large number of prisoners, the doubts about their guilt in law or in fact, serious complaints about disparity of sentences, ill-treatment after arrest, diplock courts; the presence of security forces personnel in the prisons after seven years during which serious charges of murder and brutal ill-treatment were laid at their door, the latter being upheld at the European Court of Human Rights. Justice must be impartial and balanced and seen to be so; the relatives of the prisoners do not see it so.

Ten years ago there were about 600 prisoners in Northern Ireland; now there are 3000; that is not due to a rise in the crime rate of breaking and entering, rape and drunken driving. It is due to crimes that are politically motivated. These men are sentenced by *special courts* after being interrogated by *special methods* under detention by emergency *special laws* and sentenced to *special long sentences*; yet any claim they may make to have a special category status in the prison is denied. This denial led to a protest by approximately 300 prisoners at the present time; they refuse to wear prison clothes or to do prison work: These are the *men on the blanket*. These men are increasing in number every day and by the Summer time will number 500 and go on increasing. What the Catholic public who are opposed to violence, will think when 1 in every thousand of the Catholic population (1 in every 200 males) is naked in Long Kesh under protest, we leave to their imagination. Extend this situation on an increasing scale for 25 years and see the true dimensions of a very serious problem for the peacemaker in Northern Ireland.

There are about 260 prisoners on the Blanket at present in H Block 5 and H Block 3 in Long Kesh and 6 in the Crumlin Road prison and 24

women in Armagh prison who can wear their own clothes, but who refuse to do any work. The average age of these prisoners is 20 years and about 50% are 18 years, another grim portent for the future. 80% have been charged on signed statements (their own); 76.6% have been found guilty on these alone. Many say the signed statements were taken under duress, but the courts accept the evidence of the prosecution.

LIVING CONDITIONS

There are two prisoners in each cell, although the cells were built for one prisoner; this may not be an advantage as prisoners cannot choose or change their cell mate and they may get on each other's nerves.

They are locked in their cells 24 hours a day except for a few minutes "slopping out" in the morning, when two prisoners at a time go to empty their pots (the longest time out of the cell is Mass time on Sundays, about 45 minutes). It is alleged that some don't get slopped out within the time allowed and that, if this happens, they have to keep their unemptied pots for another day.

A basin of water is brought to each cell after slopping out for washing. The prisoners could go to wash-basins outside the cells for washing and shaving but they were allowed only one towel and as they use this to cover themselves they would have no towel for drying themselves. They have asked for a second towel but they have been refused. They refuse therefore to use the washing facilities outside the cells. Most of them grow beards because of the lack of proper facilities for shaving; they are allowed one tube of tooth paste every seven weeks.

The prisoners on protest are not allowed cigarettes, tobacco, newspapers, radios, any kind of games and no books or reading materials except religious books and magazines. They are called "strippers" and "streakers" by the prison officers.

The prisoners do not get any exercise except what they can do in their cells; those who try to do physical exercises in their cells find that they are very exhausted after a short time and so the tendency seems to be not to do such exercises. The reason for the coming on of such exhaustion is lack of fresh air and the lack of normal exercise like walking. Also there is really no room in the cells for doing physical exercises properly.

FOOD

Dinner is at 12.45 p.m. and tea at 5 p.m., and a cup of tea at 7 p.m. Comments on the food are adverse, "cold" etc. The thin slices of meat are described as "blotting paper". There seems to be little variety and the quantity is "not

enough". The reason why the food is cold is because it has to be brought around to the cells, but the allegation was made that the prison staff delay the distribution of the food, making tea themselves while the food can be seen sitting there.

TOILET FACILITIES

This normally means a pot in the cell used by the prisoners. It is possible to get out to the toilets but permission seems to depend on the attitude of individual prison staff. A bell is used to attract the attention of the prison staff and the allegation was made that one prisoner who rang the bell a number of times for permission to use the toilet, was given a punishment of time "on the boards" for "improper use of government property".

MENTAL STRAIN

Prisoners on the blanket suffer constant or at least frequent psychological mental strain which could have bad effects in the long run. It seems prisoners often feel like screaming or letting off steam by banging furniture around the cell. One man released after ten months on the blanket (on appeal) said he felt it difficult to mix with people and had a tendency to be withdrawn into himself. He felt the urge to go away from people and sit by himself; another said he kept going into trances and sitting staring at the wall while people tried to bring him out of it; he went dizzy on one occasion in public and began to smash up the place and then fainted.

PRISON OFFICERS' CONDUCT

Prisoners complain about prison officers' conduct, about slapping or messing them about in various degrees and bad language. They allege that if they make such allegations, that they are in danger of being charged with "swearing at a P.O." or being put on some charge and then put "on the boards". It is impossible to ascertain the truth or otherwise of these allegations in the welter of accusations and counter accusations.

To entertain themselves the prisoners hold concerts, quiz competitions - even debates. They do this by standing at the doors of their cells and shouting; they also say the Rosary in this way. It seems now that this type of communication has become more difficult, if not impossible, because the "crack" between the door and the door jamb, through which the prisoners shouted and through which they could see, has been covered and sealed with a metal strip. Once at least when the prisoners were saying the Rosary, there was a lot of rattling doors and banging of batons and

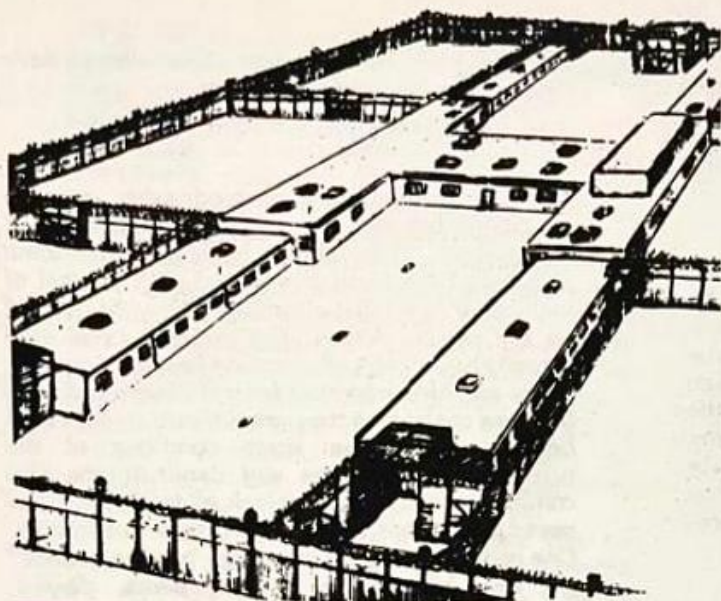
noise outside. Rosary beads, they allege, have been confiscated and missalettes.

Dissatisfaction is expressed with medical treatment, but that is a common complaint in all institutions. They allege however that some prisoners have been threatened with refusal of medical or specialist attention if they do not put on the prison clothes, but no case of a man actually being refused attention has been quoted. Colds are the commonest form of illness and once they are contracted they are difficult to get rid of because of the run down condition of the prisoners. Skin rashes and dandruff are also common ailments due to lack of fresh air (they never get outside) and lack of proper nutriment. One prisoner who was nine days "on the boards" got frost bite. Pains in legs, joints, elbows, shoulders are also common apparently due to lack of exercise. Eyesight complaints are also alleged - this may be due to the glare of lights on the white walls of the cells and short range of viewing all day every day. Cold and bare feet may lead to kidney complaints, arthritis.

Visits are allowed once a month for half an hour but the prisoners must put on clothes. Letters are now allowed once a week, but this is a recent concession.

PUNISHMENT CELLS

There are 28 of them, one padded. The furniture is a wooden bed and pillow and chair and "pot" (it is alleged that the pot has no lid). It is also alleged that there is no heat worth talking about in the punishment cells - the only ventilation seems to be through a pipe in the wall. The prisoners cannot see out of the punishment cells. Mattress and bedclothes are brought in at night. There is no reading material but a copy of the Bible is provided. It is alleged that frequent punishments "on the boards" are handed out for trivial and sometimes false offences. One was put "on the boards" for making chess men out of toilet paper; one was sent there for three days because the fly leaf of his Bible was removed although others had been in the cell - the charge was "damaging government property." Some prisoners have been given as much as 15 days "on the boards". One because he complained that he did not get a clean towel one week; another for ringing the bell to go to the toilet (charge "misuse of government property").



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Easter 1978

PUNISHMENT IN H BLOCK

Bedding is removed from the cells once every fortnight for three days as a punishment - during the day only - it is restored at night. The prisoners do not speak to the prison visitors as they regard them as part of the establishment. The prison welfare men refused for a time to go into H Block as a protest at the exceptionally harsh treatment of the men there. One man had his wedding ring confiscated; those who have lost limbs find the cold hard to endure; One man who had to go to hospital was chained.

It is clear that British treatment of the helpless Irish has not changed for the better over the centuries and it will have the same disastrous consequences - in 2010 and 2020 for Anglo-Irish relatives. Coercion has never succeeded.

