

PORTLAOISE PRISON

Can we remain silent?

By Fr. Piaras O'Duill.

By any standards the scale of punishment inflicted on the prisoners in Portlaoise Prison is outrageous, amounting to an appalling degree of cruelty. Such illtreatment of sentenced prisoners is most serious and disturbing. Conditions in the prison at the moment are worse than at any time previously and certainly as severe as in British and Northern prisons. Apart from the general and petty harassment of political prisoners by the authorities there are three specific areas of punishment practised in Portlaoise which cause concern: solitary confinement, strip searches, and visiting conditions.

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

Long spells in solitary confinement for the least infringement of rules is particularly vindictive and can only be described as savage. I am particularly concerned about punishment by solitary confinement — the shortest duration of which is never less than seven days and can be as long as six weeks. Solitary confinement is an ancient and barbarous punishment that should be ended immediately as it is fraught with dangers to the physical and mental health of the subject.

This kind of punishment is imposed at the whim of the prison governor and as I stated for the slightest breach of discipline. Examples of such infringements are: (a) refusing to address a prison warder as "Sir". (b) switching on a light without permission.

The prisoner in solitary confinement is kept in a special cell away from other prisoners and held incommunicado for the full duration. For the initial three days he is kept in the cell for the full 24 hours. After that he is then allowed a half-hour exercise alone each day. He is strip-searched going to exercise and again on his return. The cell has no furniture whatsoever during the day. Everything removed, the prisoner is compelled to stand, walk about the cell barefoot or sit on the floor. Shoes are taken from the prisoners during solitary confinement. He eats his food on the floor.

Many prisoners in Portlaoise, because of the stringency of discipline and the whimsical moods of the Governor have to endure solitary confinement at some stage of their sentence. Medical evidence corroborates that this type of confinement causes severe mental and physical distress to the prisoner and his family. It certainly does nothing to help the prisoner from a rehabilitation point of view. In fact there is a lot of evidence to demonstrate that this type of punishment and unnecessary hardship is in fact counter productive. It should also be remembered that the prisoner in solitary confinement is allowed no cigarettes, no writing materials, no handicrafts, visits or letters. In other words, his confinement is complete. No doubt the authorities are aware that reversal of previously held certainties is more easily gained where the individual is isolated. He is subjected to frequent strip searches, a humiliation to which all prisoners, even those not in solitary confinement, are subjected.

These prisoners are being sentenced to solitary confinement, regardless of the prison rules and the rules for the treatment of prisoners as laid down by the United Nations in 1955. Solitary confinement has been established by Amnesty International as a form of torture itself.

THE STRIP SEARCHES

These searches often involve 7 or 8 warders entering a cell and holding the prisoner down while his clothes are torn from him. When completely

naked, he is then physically searched and his private parts explored by these warders. Having completed the search, the prisoner is locked in his empty cell where the warders may return several times during the day, sometimes within ten minutes and repeat these search tactics. Some prisoners have been searched five times within 24 hours and some as often as three times within 40 minutes. Prisoners have been turned upside down, while their cheeks are pulled apart and the prison warders probe the prisoner's anus. It is alleged that other warders stand and jeer.

Exploration of the anus is a medical procedure which should be carried out with great care. It is important to relax the patient so that the examination is carried out with a minimum of pain and distress to the patient. The procedure can have some dangerous side effects for the person should some basic rules not be observed. These rules are taught in medical and nursing schools throughout the country. To my knowledge none of the warders carrying out this procedure in Portlaoise have ever attended medical or nursing schools. As it is a medical procedure and should it be necessary at all, then it should only be performed by medical/nursing personnel who are bound by ethical codes to conduct it in an ethical manner and not in the barbaric manner with which it is performed in this prison. This type of behaviour by the authorities can only do untold physical and psychological damage to the person — a very high price to pay in the name of security.

The following account was given to me by Councillor Joe O'Neill, a member of the Bundoran Urban District Council. He was recently a remand prisoner in Portlaoise before being cleared of charges.

"During the last week in July, 1976, I was strip searched six times in 24 hours in Portlaoise. Because I removed my own clothes on demand they were not taken off me violently; but even this compliance, under great strain, due to the frequency of the searches, did not prevent the warders from making me bend over and pulling my buttocks apart with their bare hands so that they could inspect my anus.

"Because of the utterly degrading nature of such searches and their frequency it was with great difficulty that I managed to restrain myself and refrained from resisting such humiliation. Had I not done so I would have been brutally beaten into submission as happened to some of my colleagues.

"I regard the prison regime in Portlaoise as totally repressive. Men are sentenced to seven and 14 days solitary confinement on the mere whim of the Governor with no avenue of appeal open to them. It is impossible to see how men can serve sentences ranging from 10 to 20 years without becoming physical and mental wrecks".

(Cllr. Joe O'Neill).

The Dept. of Justice acknowledged that warders use force to inflict these searches. This force has resulted in prisoners being injured. But as visits are suspended at the mention of prison happenings the evidence of these searches are hidden from the public. Prisoners, because they are strip searched before and after each visit, have in many cases developed an aversion to visits from their families and loved ones. Such is the terrible effect of strip-searching.

VISITING CONDITIONS

There are further reasons why visiting day in Portlaoise can be painful for the prisoner. Visiting a prisoner in christian tradition is considered to be one of the corporal works of mercy. In Portlaoise prison it is a traumatic experience inflicted by the prison authorities not only on the prisoner but also on the innocent party, his relatives.

In recent times in Portlaoise prison — in the name of security — the number of visitors admitted in one day has been drastically curtailed, thereby causing relatives who travel long distances to wait in cold and stormy weather for long periods and tolerate the uncertainty of not knowing if they will get in to see the prisoner or not.

Only recently a prisoner, Eamonn Sullivan of Dublin, who is serving 7 years in this prison, learned that his wife had been served with an order preventing her from ever visiting him again. One would expect that the duty of a prison authority would be to facilitate rather than inconvenience relatives — the contrary is the practice of the Portlaoise authorities. Here is the description of a visit by one father to his son:

"I visited my son in Portlaoise on November 20th, 1976. The 'visit' lasted 20 minutes. The warden in charge insisted that we stand within two feet of him. He was equipped with a notebook on which he took notes of our conversation. Another warden, obviously embarrassed, was compelled to stand immediately behind my son for the duration of the 'visit'. This is standard practice. Add to that, that you view the prisoner through two grills of close mesh and two strips of dirty perspex and you have some measure of the intensity of malevolence which pervades the very atmosphere of this place".

Patrick Stagg, a nephew of Frank Stagg who died on hunger-strike last year because of his treatment in a British jail, was arrested on Friday, September 10th last. His father was refused a visit to his son on the following day. On Monday, 13th his mother was told by the Portlaoise authorities that no visit could be granted to her unless she wrote a letter requesting one. She did so and on the following day, Tuesday, 14th she travelled to Portlaoise in order to be there early on Wednesday morning to see her son. She failed to gain admission throughout Wednesday, even after producing her passport as identification and returned home discouraged and distraught.

For 12 days the mother and father failed to see their son, a remand prisoner, and had no idea what condition he was in medically or otherwise. A letter was received by the mother from her son during that time. Written on the 14th and postmarked the 17th, it had eight lines completely blackened out by the prison censor and stamped by him. This left the minimum of information regarding the prisoner's well-being.

Similar hardships are being endured by the families of other prisoners some of whom are almost totally isolated from the outside world. In fact, there is no question of family visits in the true sense. Visitors must apply individually to the Governor. They must supply a photograph of themselves plus other identification. It may take many weeks before they receive a reply, if any, and in the meantime they are subject to visits and enquiries by the Special Branch police. Having finally procured a visiting permit, they have to wait outside the prison gates, sometimes for hours in all weathers, before being called in, two at a time, to be searched before being permitted entry to the waiting room. Again they are humiliated by searches before entering the visiting rooms.

Once in the visiting room, the prisoner and his family are separated by two formidable wire grills rising from table level to ceiling level. One grill rises on the visitor's side of the table, about 9" from the edge; the second rises on the prisoner's side, again about 9" from the edge. There is a two foot gap between each grill. The grills are made of rectangular wire mesh with holes approximately 1" x $\frac{1}{2}$ ". This latticed wire mesh runs in opposite directions on either side, making the largest through-space $\frac{1}{4}$ " sq. Attached to the inside of each grill is a perspex partition rising 18" from table level, thus further increasing the difficulty of carrying on a conversation. The grills run the whole length of the room (about 30 ft.) though, at the moment, only one visit is allowed in each room, despite their size. There is also a wire cage at the end of the table in which the supervising warden sits and takes notes of the conversation, writing down the most intimate and personal family details. A second warden stands guard behind the prisoner. Both prisoner and visitor have to stand during the visit in order to see and hear each other over the perspex partitions. Such a situation is degrading and inhuman.

PRIESTS BARRED FROM VISITING

Priests are being refused permission by the Minister for Justice to visit their parishioners in Portlaoise. Listen to this for official clap-trap: "There can be no pressing reason for a visit from their parish priest and the visit from Canon McIvor cannot therefore be approved" — this is typical of the many replies from the Department of Justice to requests for clerical visits in a spiritual capacity.

In fact all clergymen, other than the official chaplain or close priest-relatives, are barred from visiting the prisoners in Portlaoise. The prisoners are not allowed to use the prison church though a room is made available for Sunday Mass. During Mass the altar is surrounded by Gardai and prison warders. The prisoners stand in the centre of the overcrowded room, themselves encircled by prison warders and gardai. There is a wire cage

in the room in which those enduring solitary confinement must attend Mass. Under these conditions the practice of one's religion is an ordeal.

NO EDUCATION ALLOWED

Educational facilities are forbidden in the prison, not indeed by the prison rules but by the prison authorities. Surely the imposition of such limits as the deprivation of education is in this age bordering on the irresponsible. Lectures, whether by outside lecturers or by chosen prisoners are forbidden. The prison Governor's reply to this request was: (unbelievably) "No prisoner is entitled to further the education of another". Educational books are also forbidden as are all classes, debates, correspondence, basic teaching aids such as drawing equipment, textbooks, cassettes and records. Prisoners are forbidden to practise a hobby or undertake handcraft of any description.

All the above issues have been raised on numerous occasions with both Church and welfare authorities who, though sympathetic to the demands of the prisoners, admitted that they made no progress with the prison authorities. A wall of indifference has met every reasonable demand for educational facilities and it seems that the considered policy of the authorities is one of forcing the prisoners to vegetate. Is it any wonder that Fr. Denis Faul, that great campaigner for human rights and a critic of all violence had this to say:

"The prison world of the Northern Catholic people exists also in the South, the journey there is longer, the conditions for the visit are harsher, the soldiery are unfriendly. A crude mean and rigid application of the 19th century rules meets poor women and children at the prison. Authority in the south of Ireland is totally deaf to the pleas for more human and modern treatment for prisoners, their families and spiritual directors. The heartless, official letter written in bad English, is the only response of an Irish Government to a plea for decency".

When addressing a clerical ecumenical conference in March last, Fr. Faul said that the ex-prisoners he had met from Portlaoise prison were more socially disorientated than ex-prisoners from either Six County or British jails. It is my own opinion that the worst prison in these islands is that of Portlaoise. The ill-treatment at present meted out in Six County jails and in prisons in Britain is well known. However, considerably less is known about the plight of the men in Portlaoise who are degraded, beaten and deprived by the authorities of that prison. The families of these prisoners are well used to the curt note received from the Governor stating: "As a result of an incident in this prison all letters and visits to a son/husband have been suspended. You will next be entitled to letters and visits on"

Relatives and families of the prisoners are very concerned about the psychiatric and physical welfare of their menfolk in Portlaoise. These prisoners may not have received the extreme physical ill-treatment that inmates are enduring in, for example, Albany prison (Isle of Wight) but there is little doubt that psychological ill-treatment is practised on Portlaoise prisoners to a much finer point than in Six County or British prisons.

The destructive effects of solitary confinement and humiliation of forced stripping which can cripple the personality, distort behaviour and produce permanent psychological scarring of a more serious consequence than bodily injury is borne out by medical evidence. By and large, the existing situation in Portlaoise prison with its conditions of tension and psychological pressures is injurious to the mental and physical health of prisoners. When such an attempt is made to undermine the personality of the prisoner by isolating or to rob him of his self-respect by the repetitive humiliation of strip searching — under such manipulation and stress the prisoner must break or resort to revolt.

The choice is narrow. To the prisoner in such a situation revolt seems preferable. Violence is forced upon him. There must be an end put to this situation. Christians everywhere, who are concerned with human rights, must demand a sworn public enquiry into the conditions in Portlaoise prison.

A sworn enquiry was demanded by three well-known public figures in January, 1975, namely, a Senior Counsel, Senator and an actress of international fame. This was refused as was their request for a visit to the prison. It is time for others to speak out.