

ADDRESS BY DES LONG, VICE -PRESIDENT
REPUBLICAN SINN FEIN AT MEDIA BRIEFING
ON TUESDAY, 17TH OCTOBER IN DUBLIN

At the outset I would like to thank you for attending here today at this media briefing to highlight what I can only describe as a torture unit which exists in Cork prison and is referred to as D block by the prison authorities.

A member of our movement was recently detained in Cork prison and as a result of his experience we have no hesitation in claiming that he was tortured: in fact he was subject to abuse and mistreatment, deprived of sleep and dis-oriented and degraded by people in the service of the State.

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In short the treatment meted out to him does amount to torture. It is ironic that such treatment meted out to Republicans led to the British Government being hauled before and being convicted by the European Court of Human Rights. We intend to alert all the international prisoner organisations to the existence of this torture unit in Cork.

Our prisoner was placed in this unit because he demanded political status and undertook a protest to achieve this aim. It is obvious to us that the State does not wish to give members of our movement political status simply because we do not agree with the current political process.

We believe that the decision to put Michael Hegarty into this torture unit was taken at the highest Cabinet level. In fact we hold the Minister for Justice responsible for this decision.

All her Cabinet colleagues must share in the blame and take some responsibility for the ill treatment meted out to Michael Hegarty. We do not believe that this type of unit should exist or that people should be subject to this type of ill treatment.

The people of Ireland are led to believe that these type of prison units existed only in Communist Russia or in the banana republics of South America where little value is placed on human life and where liberty and freedom are concepts that people strive for in their everyday lives.

The Cabinet -- which includes Ministers from the Labour party and Democratic Left, formerly the Workers Party and formerly Official Sinn Fein -- are presiding over torture in Irish prisons.

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As far back as 1946 the Labour Party was concerned about prison conditions in Ireland. In the wake of the hunger and thirst strike of Sean McCaughy, the Labour Party sent a delegation consisting of William Davin, Martin O'Sullivan, L.J. Duffy, and James Larkin Jr. to Portlaoise Prison to investigate the atrocious conditions under which prisoners were being held.

A report of the visit was printed by the Labour Party in its pamphlet "PRISONS AND PRISONERS IN IRELAND" On page 11 of the publication we read: "What is involved in solitary confinement is this:

- (1) The prisoner is locked into his cell for 24 hours per day.
- (2) He has no contact with any person except a prison official
- (3) He may not send or receive letters.
- (4) He may not receive visits from friends or anybody else
- (5) He cannot get a newspaper
- (6) He may not go out into the open air.
- (7) He is not permitted to exercise outside his cell.

These are exactly the conditions under which Michael Hegarty was held in Cork prison last week. He was also subject to physical and mental torture.

The Labour Party called in its report for "*the discontinuance of solitary confinement and bread and water diet as a form of prison punishment.*"

We see that this recommendation appears to have been ignored.

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Even before the existence of the Labour Party, Charles Stewart Parnell, speaking about his prison experiences, I quote *"It would drive me mad. Solitude and silence and too terrible to think of. I would kill a warder and get hanged rather than have to undergo.. such agony...and possible insanity."*

We now call on the Labour Party and their colleagues in the 26 County Administration in accordance with their 1946 findings, to close down this torture unit in Cork prison before more suffering and agony is inflicted on all prisoners.

While we acknowledge that representatives of the three main political parties in the State, Eamon O Cuiv, Dan Neville, and Joe Costelloe have taken an interest in prison conditions in England, we would now ask them to turn their welcome attention to prison conditions in the State and campaign for the closure of this unit.

Since Michael Hegarty was in Cork prison, I have interviewed a number of prisoners who were detained in this unit; some were prepared to be named, and all confirm the terrible conditions associated with this unit.

The high number of prison suicides in recent years is a worrying feature. A number of those I spoke said that they believe that fear of being transferred to this unit was the cause of some of the suicides.

The fact that this unit exists has not and will not deter Republicans who will continue to demand political status and fight for better conditions in prison.

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This unit is an indictment of the failure of the prison system: it is in fact State approved terror. It has no place in the Ireland of 1995 and we in RSF will continue to highlight such atrocious prison conditions.

Our movement will continue to seek political status for our prisoners and we sent greetings to those in Limerick prison who are still demanding political status and a transfer to Portlaoise jail.

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