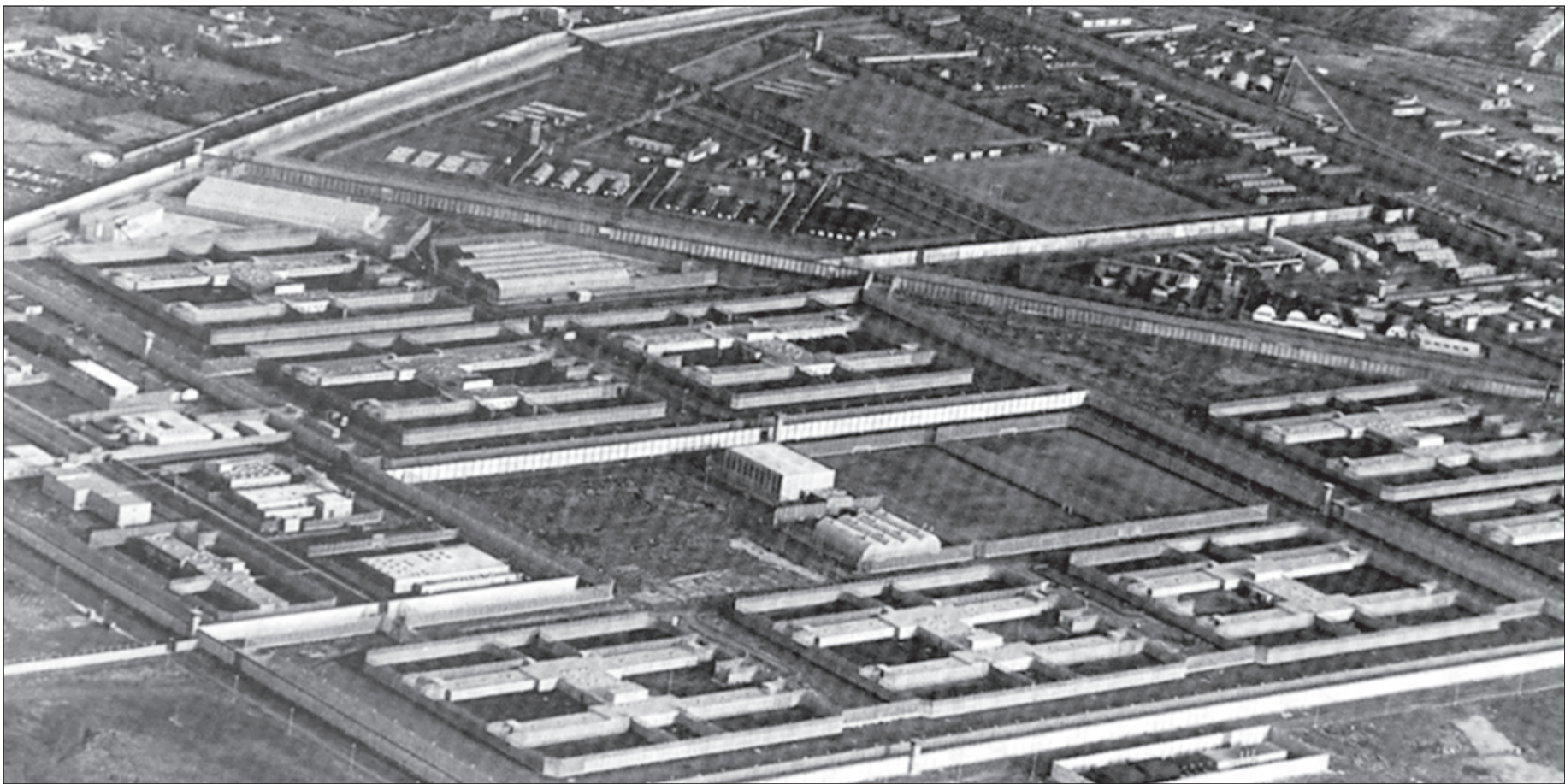


STATE PAPERS: NORTHERN IRELAND



■ **CATEGORY:**
By May 23 1978 more than 320 prisoners in the H Blocks at the Maze were refusing to wear prison clothes or to work in protest at the removal of special category status

Pope was 'gravely concerned' by escalation of dirty protest

THE escalation of the 'dirty protest' at the Maze Prison in 1978 is detailed in the previously confidential files. In a report dated April 1 1978 from the prison near Lisburn deputy governor Albert Miles highlighted signs of a stepping-up of the protest by prisoners in the H Blocks in order to gain "publicity for this propaganda campaign".

The file contains lists of prisoners with details of remission lost to date due to the failure to comply with prison regulations.

Heading the list was Kieran Nugent, a Provisional IRA member and the first prisoner to be sentenced after the abolition of special category status in 1976. Nugent had lost 519 days of remission.

In a note to NIO junior minister Don Concannon on April 4 1978 an official, ED Barry, noted that prisoners in two H Blocks had stepped up the protest and were refusing to work, shower or "slop out".

This was, he believed, a further attempt to put pressure on staff and support "the men on the blankets" in an escalation of the campaign to restore special category status.

The file detailed a series of escape attempts from the Maze in early 1978.

On April 5 Mr Barry proposed to Mr Concannon that in future all special category prisoners attempting to escape and charged accordingly should be transferred to cell blocks pending their trial.

Only if found not guilty should they be returned to the special category compound.

The prisons issue was discussed at a briefing in Stormont Castle on April 25 1978. The minister expressed satisfaction that a recent visit by Conservative MPs had gone well. This



■ **PRISONER:** Kieran Nugent

helped him in assessing the likely parliamentary reaction.

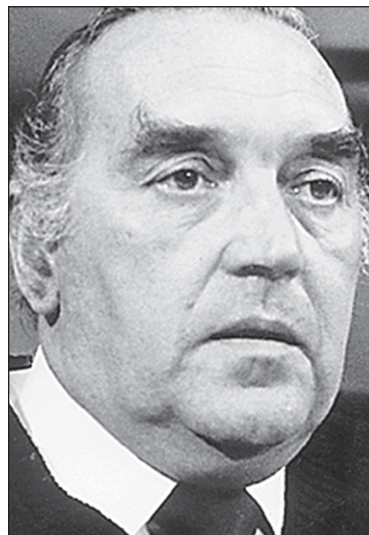
By May 1978 leading Catholic churchmen were concerned at the deteriorating situation in the prisons.

That month Mr Concannon replied to a letter from Bishop Edward Daly of Derry expressing concern at the protest and proposing a form of "emergency status" as a possible way-out.

The minister replied firmly: "I must make it plain that there are going to be no concessions on the question of special treatment for prisoners, no matter how such treatment may be described".

Emergency status, he said, seemed to imply an amnesty at some stage. This had been firmly ruled out by secretary of state Roy Mason.

Mr Mason was told in a briefing note, dated May 23, that 321 prison-



■ **BRIEFING:** Roy Mason

ers were refusing to wear prison clothes or to work in protest at the removal of special category status.

The protesting prisoners were to be punished by loss of remission and privileges.

On August 1 1978 Archbishop of Armagh Tomas O Fiaich visited the Maze and issued a strong statement.

Dr O Fiaich said he was aware of the grave concerns of the Holy See at the situation and wished to provide the Pope with a factual account.

Of conditions in the H Blocks he said: "One would hardly allow an animal to remain in such conditions, let alone a human being."

The Archbishop compared the situation to the slums of Calcutta.

"The stench and filth of some cells was almost unbearable," he said.

Dr O Fiaich argued that, contrary to the British government's contention,



■ **VISIT:** Dr Tomas O Fiaich

these prisoners were "in a different category to the ordinary".

"Many are youthful and come from families which have never been in trouble with the law though they lived in areas which suffered discrimination in housing and jobs," he said.

An NIO statement on August 1 1978 expressed surprise at Archbishop O Fiaich's statement and reaffirmed the government's determination to "stand firm in its policy on special category status".

However, the growing international impact of the prison protest is candidly acknowledged in a memo circulated to NIO ministers in May 1978.

"The protest has been the PIRA's main propaganda cause for the last year. It is also the main reason for renewed American support for the IRA," it said.

"Widespread publicity is to be generated following the release of the original protestor, Kieran Nugent, on 12 May".

The British government was concerned that four protesters had applied to the European Commission of Human Rights which would rule shortly.

Any change, an official noted, "would lead to expectation of an amnesty for terrorists; this would boost paramilitary recruitment".

The situation continued to escalate into the autumn and in a memo dated October 20 1978 an official, E Hannigan, reported to Mr Mason on the dangers in the situation for the British government.

"The determination of the protesting prisoners seems strong. They may believe they are winning the propaganda battle which is being controlled by the PIRA," he said.

In his view, the secretary of state needed to be aware of the risks.

"Responsible people and bodies who profess little sympathy with the object of the protest hold the government responsible," he said.

The official added that the government would be held culpable if an epidemic broke out in the prison.

However, he noted that the prisoners' demands – the right to wear their own clothes, not to do prison work and to enforce their own discipline – amounted to POW status.

This would have severe implications for British policy, he said.

"They would thus be prisoners of war and eligible for release at the conclusion of hostilities.

"The courts would be seen as political courts. The RUC would become political police, not the impartial guardians of the law. Terrorism would become respectable."