

**‘I AM SIR,  
YOU ARE A NUMBER’**

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**Report of the Independent Panel  
of Inquiry into the Circumstances  
of the H-Block and Armagh  
Prison Protests 1976-1981**

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**Coiste na nIarchimí  
Béal Feirste / Belfast**



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**THE REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT  
PANEL OF INQUIRY INTO THE  
CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE H-BLOCK  
AND ARMAGH PRISON PROTESTS 1976-1981**

First published October 2020

*Coiste na nIarchimí*  
*Béal Feirste / Belfast*

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*“I am Sir.” The words echo around my tomb. “I am Sir” it bellows again. “I am Sir, you are 1066.” The door slams shut with a loud explosive boom, killing the dim light where the entrance had been. Still afraid to move, I stand in the total darkness. What is 1066, I think? Obviously it is me, but I can think, speak, smell and touch. I have all my senses, therefore I am not a number, I am not 1066. I am human, I am not a number, I am not 1066. Who, or what, is a ‘Sir’? It frightened me. It was evil. I sensed its hatred of me, its eagerness to dominate me, and its potential violent nature.*

Bobby Sands 1st July 1978

The Independent Panel acknowledges the testimonies of all who contributed to this Report, particularly the men and women incarcerated in Crumlin Road Jail Belfast, Long Kesh, the H-Blocks and Armagh Gaol

Béal Feirste/ Belfast  
October 2020



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# INTRODUCTION

## COMPOSITION OF THE PANEL

The Independent Panel was established jointly by Coiste na nIarchimí and Ó Muirigh Solicitors. It was chaired by the late Warren Allmand, former Solicitor-General for Canada; alongside Richard Harvey, Barrister-at-Law, Garden Court Chambers, London; and Dr John Burton, retired family doctor and researcher in Human Rights Law. Access to prisoners' files, preparation of prisoners' testimonies, legislative research and access to Government documents were administered by Ó Muirigh Solicitors

## BACKGROUND

On 30th July 1978, Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich, Primate of all Ireland and Archbishop of Armagh, visited Republican prisoners held in Long Kesh/ HMP The Maze. His visit was at the height of prisoners' protests demanding British State recognition of their political status in the context of persistent violation of their rights and systemic assaults by prison guards. He was shocked by what he witnessed, stating:

*The authorities refuse to admit that these prisoners are in a different category from the ordinary [prisoner], yet everything about their trials and family background indicates that they are different. They were sentenced by special courts without juries. The vast majority were convicted on allegedly voluntary confessions obtained in circumstances which are now placed under grave suspicion by the recent report of Amnesty International. Many are very youthful and come from families which had never been in trouble with the law, though they lived in areas which suffered discrimination in housing and jobs. How can one explain the jump in the prison population of Northern Ireland from five hundred to three thousand unless a new type of prisoner has emerged?*

The gravity of suffering endured by male prisoners held in Long Kesh/ HMP The Maze and by women prisoners held in HMP Armagh, and its impact on their families, has persisted to this day. It has resulted in this long-overdue inquiry, established in

response to families' requests to chronicle prisoners' experiences in jail. Participants seek neither redress nor compensation. For survivors and those who have since died, for their families and communities, and in the public interest, the work of the Panel records the institutional abuse of State power and authority. It is intended that the personal testimonies and Panel's findings will contribute significantly to the historical record of the Conflict.

Four decades on from the Blanket Protest there is wider relevance in documenting the context and consequences of prisoners' protest. It is to reveal the privations of prison conditions, their operational regimes and the politics of incarceration. In construction and function, prisons are hidden from view, their operations lacking public scrutiny or accountability. This Report contributes to that open scrutiny.

As Nelson Mandela stated, 'No one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails'. For they are closed worlds of isolation, control and arbitrary punishment, 'designed to break one's spirit and destroy one's resolve'. The 'challenge for every prisoner', he continued, is 'how to survive prison intact, how to emerge from a prison undiminished' given that prison regimes are designed to 'exploit every weakness, demolish every initiative, negate all signs of individuality – all with the idea of stamping out that spark that makes each of us human and each of us who we are'.

Focusing on conflict in Ireland, particularly in the North, numerous biographical accounts, authoritative books, academic research papers and theses have been written and broadcast. However, it is appropriate to recognise the contribution nationally and internationally of former prisoner, writer, playwright and film-maker, Laurence McKeown.<sup>1</sup>

Additional to this Report, an open, public archive will be made available generated by the interviews conducted by the Panel. It will be of value to researchers, informing future generations that prisoners, whatever their status, are entitled to the safeguards of international human rights standards and that prisoners of conflict require special protections from oppressive prison policies and conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Laurence McKeown's PhD, from Queen's University, Belfast, is entitled 'Unrepentant Fenian Bastards': *The Social Construction of an Irish Republican Prisoner Community*. He has published: *Nor Meekly Serve My Time: The H-Block Struggle 1976-1981* (with Brian Campbell and Felim O'Hagan); *Out of Time: Irish Republican Prisoners Long Kesh 1972-2000*, and the film, *H3*, centring on the 1981 Hunger Strike, co-written with Brian Campbell. His numerous plays include *The Laughter of Our Children*, *Those You Pass on the Street* and *Green & Blue*. His first collection of poems, *Threads*, was published in 2019.

## TERMS OF REFERENCE

To inquire into and document the circumstances resulting in the prison protests in Long Kesh/ HMP The Maze and HMP Armagh between 1976 and 1981 that preceded the 1981 Hunger Strike.

To report on the physical and psychological conditions experienced by prisoners who participated in the protests including long-term physical, psychological and civil consequences endured by them or their families.

To identify breaches of domestic and international law and human rights standards.

## STRUCTURE AND SCOPE

- The Panel heard testimonies from thirty-four Republican blanket protestors, two Loyalist prisoners, two former prison governors, medical practitioners (including a consultant psychiatrist) and lawyers, academics, politicians and clergy.

Documentary research focused on:

- The background to, and reasons for, the commencement of the prison protests – the ‘Blanket’ protests – between 1976 and 1981 focusing specifically on the impact of the British State’s withdrawal of Special Category Status from political prisoners
- The operational legal framework including prison rules
- Prison Governors’ and the Board of Visitors’ responses to prisoners’ allegations of assault and torture administered by prison guards
- Identification of the techniques of compliance imposed by prison guards on prisoners
- Adequacy of medical treatment administered or denied to prisoners
- Identification of short and long-term negative health impacts on men and women prisoners due to exposure to chemical cleaning agents and on women held in Armagh Gaol due to asbestos exposure
- Identification of breaches of prisoners’ human rights under domestic and international law

## LEGAL PROTECTION OF PRISONERS 1976-1981

### Binding International Law

Protection from torture and from cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment lies at the heart of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948: Article 5), the European Convention on Human Rights (1953: Article 3), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966: Article 7). The Third Geneva Convention (1949: Article 13) states that prisoners of war and of conflict ‘must at all times be treated humanely’. For Governments that have agreed to these rules, there is no qualification, compromise nor derogation because of an individual’s political motivations or opinions (ECHR, Article 15:2). In their policies and practices, State institutions are compelled to implement minimum rights standards.

### Standard Minimum Rules

During the period of the Protests, the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (1955) provided the framework for ‘good principle and practice in the treatment of prisoners and the management of institutions’. The Rules were adopted by the First United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders and approved by the Economic and Social Council (31 July 1957: Resolution 663 C XXIV and Resolution 2076 LXII 13 May 1977). Standards and protections apply to all people held in State detention whether convicted of an offence, on remand, administratively detained, or imprisoned without charge. The latter includes internment.

States are obliged to implement minimum standards in all places of detention, including: classification and separation of detainees; accommodation; sanitation; adequate, ‘wholesome’ and nutritional food; drinking water; clothing; bedding; religious practice; education; physical exercise; and medical services including mental health. Article 10 states that accommodation, particularly sleeping accommodation, should ‘meet all the requirements of health, due regard being paid to climatic conditions ... to cubic content of air, minimum floor space, lighting, heating and ventilation’. Article 12 states that ‘sanitary installations shall be adequate to enable every prisoner to comply with the needs of nature when necessary and in a clean and decent manner’. Prison staff – managers, health care staff, guards – should be subject to ‘careful selection ... since it is on their integrity, humanity and professional capacity and personal suitability for the work that

the proper administration of the institutions depends' (Part 1, 46:1).

A fundamental protection in place at the time of the Blanket Protests, eventually enshrined in the 1998 Human Rights Act, was the right to freedom of thought, conscience or religion and the right to participate in collective acts of worship. Intimidation or mockery by guards directed towards prisoners because of their political or religious affiliations would have contravened the Act. Interviews conducted by the Panel provide significant, consistent evidence regarding egregious breaches of the minimum standards and protections that applied throughout the Blanket Protests.

### International and Domestic Legal Standards 1976-1981

Between 1976 and 1981, international legal standards that applied to the incarceration of politically-affiliated prisoners in the North of Ireland were the Conventions and Declarations of the United Nations and the European Convention on Human Rights.

Prison discipline was governed by Prison Rules (NI) 1954. Refusal to obey an order, for example, an order to perform prison work, was punishable by loss of remission. Within prisons, criminal law offences such as assault and other forms of violence applied to prison managers, staff and guards, and also to prisoners.

Article 5 of the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) reads: 'no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment'.<sup>2</sup> Following the Second World War, the 1949 Geneva Convention expanded protections for those held as prisoners of war, although characterisation of the British Army's deployment on the streets of Northern Ireland as 'war' is highly contested. In 1951, Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR) incorporated the wording of the UDHR<sup>3</sup> declaring that no domestic emergency could derogate from Article 5 of the UDHR.<sup>4</sup>

Allegations of torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment arose early in the history of the Northern Ireland Conflict when, in 1971, the Irish Government filed the first case brought by a member state of the Council of Europe against another. In 1976, the year the UK Government introduced the policy of criminalisation, under which politically-affiliated prisoners were re-designated 'ordinary criminals', the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) came into force. Under Article 7 of the ICCPR, the United Kingdom was obliged to ensure: 'No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment'.

In January 1976 a unanimous ruling from the European Commission on Human Rights upheld the Irish Government's case against the United Kingdom, ruling that the treatment of internees, detained during 1971, amounted to torture.<sup>5</sup> The previous year the UN General Assembly had defined torture as:

... any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted by or at the instigation of a public official on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or confession, punishing him for an act he has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating him or other persons. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to, lawful sanctions to the extent consistent with the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.

Torture constitutes an aggravated and deliberate form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.<sup>6</sup>

At the time, the British Government did not appeal the finding that in-depth interrogations used in 1971 by State agencies on detainees in Northern Ireland constituted inhuman and degrading treatment. The interrogations were severe: hooding, except during interrogation; forcing detainees to stand for hours against a wall in a spread-eagled and painful posture; submitting them to continuous and monotonous

2 Article 5 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). See Article 7 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 3 European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR), Article 5(2) American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR), Article 5 African Convention on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR).

3 Article 3: 'No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.'

4 Article 15(2) ECHR.

5 *Ireland v. the United Kingdom*, (1976) Y.B. EUR. CONV. ON HUMAN RIGHTS 512 European Commission of Human Rights, Report of the Commission.

6 1975 Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from being Subjected to Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, GA Res. 3542 (XXX) adopted without vote.

‘white noise’; sleep deprivation; and restricting their diet to one round of bread and one pint of water at six-hourly intervals.

In *Ireland v UK* the European Court unanimously upheld the Commission’s ruling that these five techniques constituted inhuman and degrading treatment. ‘Torture’, however, carried a severe stigma. The 1978 European Court ruling was instantly controversial. While concluding that the treatment of prisoners was both inhuman and degrading it stated that it did not meet the high bar of torture.<sup>7</sup> Dissenting, Judge Zekia stated ‘torture is not capable of an exact and comprehensive definition’.<sup>8</sup> It has both objective and subjective aspects, including ‘whether the injuries inflicted caused *serious consequences* for short or *long duration*’ (emphases added).

In 1978 four Blanket Protest protesters challenged the prison conditions under which they were held. The UK Government did not contest the inhumanity and degradation imposed on prisoners but argued that the conditions were ‘self-imposed’, a position it held and repeated throughout the Protest. The European Commission of Human Rights in *McFeeley v UK* accepted the UK Government’s argument,<sup>9</sup> yet recorded its concern regarding the Government’s dismissive attitude towards the incarceration of politically-affiliated prisoners. It proposed that the development of a humanitarian regime should be a priority, concluding:

[T]he Commission must express its concern at the inflexible approach of the State authorities which has been concerned more to punish offenders against prison discipline than to explore ways of resolving such a serious deadlock.<sup>10</sup>

From a human rights perspective, governments cannot ignore the context in which they imprison their citizens and place responsibility for inhuman and degrading conditions at the prisoners’ cell doors. The evidence to the Panel, and the official records held by the UK Government, unequivocally demonstrate that prisoners’ violation of prison rules was not the core issue. Rather, it was the introduction of the policy of criminalisation imposed with the intention of breaking prisoners’ collective resolve. Given the history of prison protests in Ireland, it was

foreseeable that a hunger strike would become the ultimate response. As the criminalisation policy was introduced, the IRA volunteer Frank Stagg died in Wakefield Prison, England following a hunger strike lasting sixty-two days.

This Panel is the first human rights inquiry into the lawfulness of the conditions endured by politically-affiliated prisoners in the H-Blocks and HMP Armagh. Nor has there been an assessment of the long-term serious consequences of the authorities’ determination ‘to punish offenders against prison discipline [rather] than to explore ways of resolving such a serious deadlock’. Forty-five years on, following interviews with former prisoners and research into State policy documents written at the time, it is possible to answer Judge Zekia’s question: ‘whether the injuries inflicted *caused serious consequences for short or long duration*’ (emphasis added).

Did the prevailing conditions and specific treatment within the jails amount to torture? As the testimonies demonstrate, the prolonged duration and intensity of extreme physical and psychological suffering endured by so many women and men prisoners, together with the post-trauma consequences of prolonged ill-treatment, cannot be reduced to ‘self-inflicted’ harm. Yet the prevailing State discourse was, and has remained, that prisoners chose their fate; that the Northern Ireland Prison Service, supported by civil servants in the Northern Ireland Office, accommodated and adjusted to the protests with humanity. The extensive findings of the Independent Panel, presented in this Report, challenge the veracity of that discourse.

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7 *Ireland v. United Kingdom* (5310/71) [1978] ECHR 1, paragraph 167: ‘Although the five techniques, as applied in combination, undoubtedly amounted to inhuman and degrading treatment, although their object was the extraction of confessions, the naming of others and/or information and although they were used systematically, they did not occasion suffering of the particular intensity and cruelty implied by the word torture as so understood’.

8 *Ireland v. United Kingdom* (5310/71) [1978] ECHR 1, Dissenting Opinion, Judge Zekia

9 *McFeeley et al., v United Kingdom*, Application 8317/58, European Commission on Human Rights, 15 May 1980, paragraph 43

10 *McFeeley et al., v United Kingdom*, Application 8317/58, European Commission on Human Rights, 15 May 1980, paragraph 64

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# FINDINGS

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## FINDINGS

Having considered the evidence of former prisoners whose lives remain scarred by physical and psychological suffering and social disabilities, the Panel unhesitatingly concludes that the inhuman conditions in which prisoners were held were calculated to cause intense physical and mental suffering with the intention of humiliating and debasing prisoners and breaking their physical and moral resistance.

Further, from the contextual evidence and the expert opinions sought by the Panel regarding specific types of ill-treatment and its impact, its conclusion is that many protesting prisoners in the H-Blocks and HMP Armagh were subjected to torture.

The State should reject the proposition that the suffering of former prisoners was 'self-imposed'. It was the consequence of a purposeful policy implemented by the UK Government whose institutions were fully aware that their policies and practices violated international human rights standards and breached common law and statute.

The Panel concludes, based on all the evidence received, that the ultimate legal and moral responsibility for this torture, inhuman and degrading treatment rests on the Prime Minister and senior Cabinet Ministers who knew and approved of that treatment.

### GENERIC

- The Panel heard overwhelming evidence of torture, inhuman and degrading treatment directed at Republican prisoners by prison staff throughout the period under review, 1976 to 1981
- The frequency and severity of these abuses established a systemic pattern of deliberate intent and could only have persisted with the knowledge and approval of Governors
- Severe physical assaults, consistently administered by certain guards and targeting selected prisoners, were known to Governors and medical staff and became institutionalised; they cannot be explained as occasional, random assaults by a small coterie of prison guards
- Other assaults intensified when prisoners left their cells for visits, medical examinations, body searches or cell cleaning; they were arbitrary and created a persistent climate of fear
- Overtly sectarian violence inflicted by prison guards, often on naked prisoners, included punching, kicking, batoning, dragging by the hair and sexual assaults; assaults intensified when guards were under the influence of alcohol
- Inhuman and degrading treatment endured by men and women prisoners, at times amounting to torture, was known to the UK Government; there was a failure at all levels to investigate egregious breaches of international standards for the treatment of prisoners, the regimes under which they were held and the treatment they received
- The evidence affirms that while not all prison guards or managers were directly involved in carrying out physical or psychological abuses, they were complicit by failing to report common law crimes and breaches of prison regulations they witnessed
- As a consequence of physical assaults, prisoners had multiple wounds, evident during medical examinations yet no medical records have been provided regarding such severe injuries, nor were concerns registered with senior prison authorities, Governors or the Northern Ireland Office; qualified medical practitioners, as prison doctors or nurses, failed repeatedly in their duty of care
- Prison medical care should have been consistent with provision in the community yet there is evidence that Republican prisoners viewed medical professionals as unsympathetic, uncaring and complicit with the punitive regimes imposed within the prisons
- The climate of fear that prevailed was exacerbated by threats made to prisoners by guards that information would be shared with paramilitaries regarding prisoners' families and their location
- The Panel received credible evidence that a significant number of men and women prisoners were victims of crimes that included torture, grievous bodily harm, sexual assault, actual bodily harm, assault and battery. These crimes were perpetrated against them because they protested against being categorised as 'ordinary prisoners'
- Former prisoners are unanimous in stating that they seek neither revenge nor compensation but remain committed to establishing the truth of what happened throughout their incarceration
- The evidence shows that survival in prison was sustained by prisoners' political commitment, support from families and their communities, alongside a commitment to the revival of the Irish language, storytelling, music and humour

## MALE PRISONERS

- It is clear from the evidence that the Blanket Protest was precipitated by the UK Government's withdrawal of Special Category Status from Republican prisoners and their refusal to be treated as 'ordinary' prisoners, compelled to wear prison uniform and perform prison 'work'
- The No-Wash Protest was a consequence of the refusal by prison guards to permit Republican prisoners to 'slop out'
- The prevailing official narrative throughout the protests was that privations endured by Republican prisoners were self-inflicted, yet the evidence shows that the protests were undertaken as a last resort to contest and reject the policy of criminalisation
- Former prisoners state that certain guards frequently were inebriated on duty and numerous assaults on prisoners occurred while guards were under the influence of alcohol available on-site, yet there is no evidence of guards facing disciplinary procedures
- The food provided to prisoners was substandard and regularly contaminated by guards who added urine, spittle, maggots and cockroaches
- The 'Number One Diet' was an inhumane punishment; known as being 'On the Boards', prisoners were held in solitary confinement on a bread and water diet, their cells stripped of beds or furniture
- Prisoners' exposure to chemical toxins remains a serious concern as there is evidence of prolonged illnesses, including cancer; this issue requires further investigation
- Despite Freedom of Information requests, the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Prison Service refused information to the Panel regarding chemical analysis of the toxins used in cleaning cells during the No-Wash Protest; the Panel recommends further research into the use of toxins
- There is evidence that the medical staff complied with forced washes and head/ body shaving of prisoners who resisted the regime under the pretext of treatment for lice and were aware of the severity of beatings administered by guards
- The most common and persistent mental health illness suffered by ex-prisoners is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which is profoundly debilitating for former prisoners in mid-life, many of whom experience night terrors and alcohol dependency

- Former prisoners who were young men when they participated in the Blanket Protest were targeted for severe beatings and psychological torture
- Many former prisoners were convicted on 'confessions' illegally extracted by extreme physical and psychological brutality; confirming their sense of injustice and strengthening their determination to participate actively in the protests
- In evidence, two former senior prison officials contrasted the regime at Long Kesh at the time Special Category Status was introduced to the regime that followed, demonstrating that the conditions and treatment following the removal of Special Category Status was inhuman, degrading and violent
- While the prison protests contributed eventually to securing peace, for most Republican ex-prisoners and their families the personal cost has been severe and permanent, including, long-term continuing physical and mental ill-health; unemployment; high insurance premiums

## WOMEN PRISONERS

- There is overwhelming evidence that Republican women prisoners held in 18th/19th Century Armagh Prison endured torture, inhuman and degrading treatment administered by prison guards throughout the period 1976 to 1981
- Physical and psychological abuse was frequent and of such severity it constituted a regime of deliberate intent and cannot be explained as the occasional actions of a few malevolent prison guards
- While not all prison guards were involved directly in physical or psychological abuse, they were complicit in failing to report what were common-law crimes and egregious breaches of prison regulations
- The evidence shows that the No-Wash Protest was an immediate consequence of the refusal to allow women prisoners to 'slop out'
- On 7th February 1980, Republican prisoners were subjected to brutal beatings by men and women guards on the pretext of cell searches, then held in 24-hour solitary confinement for three days
- Women were particularly vulnerable to abuse because of menstruation and sanitary requirements; sanitary wear was rationed, its provision used to embarrass and degrade women thus constituting a powerful instrument of control, particularly in the presence of male guards



- There was minimal ante-natal and post-natal maternity care provided by the prison doctor or by midwives from the local hospital trust
- In one example a woman in labour was transferred to hospital and, despite protestations by hospital staff, throughout delivery armed guards remained present and both her hands were cuffed to the bed; such cruel treatment could not be justified on security grounds
- Strip searches, on the pretext of security, were inflicted on women prisoners – frequently in the presence of male prison guards – both before and after they received legal visits or family visits. Strip searches were conducted violently, with the intention to humiliate and degrade the prisoners
- Prisoners’ family members were also frequently subjected to invasive and humiliating search procedures and verbal abuse
- Other forms of humiliation and physical assault by prison guards were routinely used as techniques of control
- Conditions in Armagh were profoundly unhealthy, exacerbated by the use of strong chemicals during the No-Wash Protest; women had difficulty breathing, breaking cell windows for ventilation which were not repaired, in winter subjecting women prisoners to extreme cold
- Powerful cold water hoses were used by guards, directed physically at women while they were in their cells, knocking them to the ground, soaking them and their clothing and saturating their bedding
- Remission was lost due to the women’s protest resulting in some prisoners serving a full sentence and losing eligibility for release on parole; they were denied information regarding release dates
- As with male prisoners, women’s endurance of the harsh conditions of imprisonment were traumatic, resulting in long-term deleterious consequences for physical and mental health and well-being
- Long-term ill-health includes a high incidence of morbidity (illness) and mortality (deaths), notably the early deaths of three women during the course of this research
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the most consistently recorded pathology; derived in women’s suffering while incarcerated it includes flashbacks that occur regularly and without warning
- Women post-release record suffering persistent discrimination including unemployment and high insurance
- In giving evidence, women showed no bitterness towards those who had subjected them to inhuman treatment while in prison, nor towards Protestant/ Unionist/ Loyalist communities, yet they restated a commitment to securing a United Ireland and an end to British Rule
- They affirmed that survival was as a consequence of their solidarity



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# PART ONE - CONTEXT

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## PART ONE - CONTEXT

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT 1916-1969

Subjected to British Rule from the 12th Century, Ireland remained a site of persistent conflict. In 1916, its anti-colonial struggle to establish independence and protect its language and culture culminated with the Proclamation of the Republic/ Forógra na Poblachta. Published by the Irish Citizen Army and the Irish Volunteers it was signed by seven men, members of the self-proclaimed Provisional Government of the Irish Republic. The Proclamation declared 'the right of the people to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible'. It was read in public by Patrick Pearse outside Dublin's General Post Office, triggering the Easter Rising. Lasting six days, the Rising was put down by thousands of British Army troops and Ireland was placed under martial law. Four hundred and eighty-five people were killed, half of whom were civilians; a third were British soldiers or police officers. Nearly three thousand civilians were injured. Over three thousand were arrested, one thousand eight hundred of whom were shipped across the Irish Sea to be incarcerated in British internment camps or prisons. Leaders of the uprising were executed.

In 1918 a coalition of Irish Republicans created a new party, Sinn Féin. A year later it returned three-quarters of Ireland's MPs to the British Parliament. In January 1919 Dáil Éireann was formed, proclaiming a Declaration of Independence. The following year the British Government imposed partition on Ireland by the Government of Ireland Act, with the twenty-six county Irish Free State becoming a British Commonwealth Dominion. Ensuring Protestant rule, six of the nine northern counties of Ulster were reconstituted as Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom. Sixteen years later Ireland became a sovereign state, eventually securing full independence in 1949 as the Republic of Ireland. A partitioned Ulster led inevitably to persistent conflict in the North as Nationalists and Republicans, constantly experiencing political discrimination and economic marginalisation within the devolved jurisdiction, campaigned for a united Ireland. As a minority population within the six counties, they believed they had been cut adrift by the Republic and subjected to British laws administered by a Unionist government.

From the arrival of partition through to the late 1960s, an uneasy peace in the North was regularly

disrupted as minority Catholic/ Nationalist/ Republican communities continued to be ruled by discriminatory 'special' powers administered by political representatives of the Protestant/ Unionist/ Loyalist majority, bolstered by gerrymandered elections. The deal over partition stitched emergency legislation into the fabric of Northern Ireland's politics. Renewed annually, the 1922 Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act (NI) eventually was made permanent in 1933. Openly sectarian, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) enforced the Act. Within their ranks were the notorious part-time reservist B Specials, recruited exclusively from Protestant/ Unionist/ Loyalist communities.

'Special powers' included the discretionary prohibition of public meetings, of certain named organisations and of the publication and distribution of literature considered politically 'seditious'. Targeted exclusively against socially and economically marginalised Catholic/ Nationalist/ Republican communities, special powers extended to the imposition of community curfews and internment without trial. Denied civil and political rights, these communities endured sectarian apartheid. In addition to hardline policing, internment without trial targeted Republicans considered a 'threat' to political stability but against whom there was insufficient or no evidence to charge with a criminal offence. Internment was a denial of due process of the law violating human rights, particularly rights to liberty and to a fair trial. For half a century, it was justified by the State as a temporary, 'emergency' power introduced to quell civil unrest.

At a time of international protests demanding civil rights for socially, politically and economically marginalised communities, a strong movement emerged within the six counties. Consolidating in the late 1960s, its clear objectives were the reform of all public and private social, political and economic institutions and an end to institutional discrimination thus ensuring equal opportunity. The underlying goal was the removal of partition to secure a unified Ireland. Responding to the growing strength of the civil rights movement its organised protests were physically attacked by Loyalists. This unrelenting escalation of violent opposition to the campaign for civil and political rights resulted in the deployment of the British Army throughout the six counties in August 1969.

## **FROM 'SPECIAL CATEGORY STATUS' TO CRIMINALISATION 1969-1981**

In consultation with Northern Ireland's Government, the British Army, together with UK Security Services and Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), policed the border with the Irish Republic and its communities both on the ground and from the air. Initially, it appeared that the UK Government's intention was to progress a reformist agenda in response to the civil rights movement. The Unionist Government, however, adopted a hard-line response and in 1970 introduced the Criminal Justice (Temporary Provisions) Act, again using 'temporary' or 'emergency' legislation to regulate community-based challenges perceived as threatening its authority. This uncompromising response included a return to internment without trial. Specifically, but not exclusively, it targeted those campaigning for a united Ireland.

Within six months 2,300 men were interned and interrogated in compounds at Long Kesh, a former military base. This indiscriminate use of mass detention breached Article 5 (right to liberty) and Article 6 (right to a fair trial) of the European Convention on Human Rights. Violations of internees' rights under Article 3 (torture, inhuman and degrading treatment) will be considered in more detail below. The State's justification for pursuing such a severe policy was that it targeted those responsible for continuing civil unrest while sustaining Unionist authority. While internees were held in Long Kesh and those convicted of offences held in Crumlin Road Gaol, all women prisoners, including internees, were held in Armagh Gaol, built between 1780 and 1852. Republican women had been interned previously in Armagh during World War II and again during the 1956-62 'Border Campaign'. From the early 1970s to 2000 politically-affiliated men and women prisoners constituted up to two-thirds of Northern Ireland's prison population.

On 30 January 1972 in Derry, soldiers of the Parachute Regiment fired live rounds indiscriminately into a peaceful protest march. Twenty-six people were shot, fourteen died. Known as Bloody Sunday, these events occurred just six months after the Parachute Regiment, over a three-day period, indiscriminately shot and killed eleven people going peaceably about their business in Ballymurphy, Belfast. In late March 1972, to the anger of Unionists and right-wing Conservatives, the Westminster Government suspended the semi-autonomous Northern Ireland Parliament at Stormont, constituted under the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, and imposed Direct

Rule from London. Part of the plan was to phase out the embarrassment of internment.

Bloody Sunday, however, resulted in a significant increase in IRA membership and 1972 became a defining year as 500 people died in the escalating war. In an uncompromising policy of arrest, detention and torture the IRA was targeted. Within two years almost a quarter of those held in prison had received long sentences (four years to life). Prior to 1972 less than one per cent had received such long sentences. With prisons holding a fast-increasing proportion of politically-affiliated prisoners serving long sentences the categorisation of prisoners became a defining issue in the policies and practices operating within the jails.

Until July 1972 political prisoners had been considered 'ordinary criminals'. Two months earlier a confrontation in Crumlin Road Gaol between a Republican prisoner and a prison guard resulted in the prisoner being transferred to the punishment block. This triggered a protest by Republican prisoners who were subjected to the 'Number One' diet consisting of tea without milk, watery soup and dry bread. Refusal to comply with prison rules also resulted in a loss of remission. Entitled to four visits per month from family or friends, those on protest were denied three 'privileged' visits and refusal to wear the uniform forfeited the fourth visit. Their only contact with the outside world was an exchange of one censored letter each month. The protestors were ordered to end the protest, wear prison uniform and carry out prison work. Reviewed every two weeks, their refusal resulted in the loss of two weeks remission and 'on the boards' punishment with all furniture removed from their cells.

As the protest escalated, the prisoners presented an unambiguous statement of their demands: political status; segregation from 'ordinary' prisoners; an end to prison work; food parcels from and extra visits with families; most significantly, the right to wear their own clothes. The Government rejected the demands and six prisoners began a hunger strike, six more joining at weekly intervals. With the possibility of men dying and the potential backlash should force-feeding be introduced, the Government acceded to the demands. While rejecting 'political prisoner' status it agreed to 'Special Category Status'. For the prisoners this was a significant victory; a political rather than criminal designation confirming their prisoner-of-war status under the Geneva Convention.

Convicted in Diplock Courts without a jury, Special Category prisoners were not obliged to wear prison uniforms nor were they assigned prison work. They organised their daily regime, were

accommodated separately from ordinary prisoners and granted additional visits and food parcels. It was a contentious shift in policy opposed by prison guards recruited almost exclusively from Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities, many with Loyalist paramilitary connections. In 1975 the Gardiner Committee, established by the UK Government, concluded that Special Category Status undermined the authority of the prisons, their management and daily administration and, therefore, should be withdrawn.

Gardiner's recommendations to eliminate Special Category Status were accepted by the Labour Government. The Panel's research has discovered that preparations already were in train to regulate prisoners' reactions to the seismic shift in the policy of categorisation. On the 29th December 1975 the Director of Prisons for Operations, W. I. Davies, wrote a document headed: 'Contingency Plans to Accommodate Changes in the Prison Population and to Deal with the Prisoner Reaction to these Changes and Subsequent Re-locations'. Marked 'SECRET', it stated:

It is anticipated that the use of hunger and thirst strikes by selected prisoners will be one of the main methods by which prisoners will attempt to force the Government to give way on this issue. It should be made known ... that the Administration will withstand this pressure *even after the death/s of prisoners*. It was mainly by the use of hunger strikes that prisoners won the privilege of special category in 1972. Having seen what an administrative and disciplinary disaster this has proved to be, we should be resolute in our intention not to weaken in our decisions ... It is anticipated that these measures will produce strong reaction from the prisoners and mass and individual hunger strikes may be expected ... the newly convicted "non-special category" prisoners housed in the 'H' Blocks at Maze and 'A' Wing in Belfast will be a source of trouble. It is expected that they will refuse to work, refuse to wear prison clothing and refuse to associate with others not of their own persuasion. These problems will have to be resolved by the Prison Staff by resolute adherence to the Standing Orders and agreed policies.<sup>11</sup> (emphasis added)

Alongside 'hunger and thirst strikes', Davies also anticipated the change in policy would provoke significant public opposition, demonstrations within Republican communities and physical damage and aggression within the prisons.

Those convicted after March 1976 were considered guilty of criminal offences and treated as ordinary criminals. It was a policy of criminalisation under which all prisoners, regardless of offence, were ordered to wear prison clothes, carry out prison work and receive visits consistent with all ordinary prisoners. As the above document demonstrates, prisoners' refusal to wear prison clothes, to associate with 'ordinary' prisoners and, eventually, to embark on hunger strikes were anticipated by the Prison Service and by the UK Government. The comment that 'the Administration will withstand this pressure even after the death/s of prisoners' anticipated hunger strikes and that consequent deaths would be acceptable within the parameters of an uncompromising policy response.

Criminalisation was a severe blow to the Republican leadership both inside and outside the prison. Relationships between Republican prisoners and prison guards, already strained, deteriorated further. In April 1976 a guard, Patrick Dillon was shot, the first of nineteen prison staff killed during the five-year protest that followed.

The Government's criminalisation policy soon extended to the vast majority of politically-affiliated prisoners. The shift in policy coincided with the opening of the H-Blocks in the purpose-built HMP Maze prison adjacent to Long Kesh, a further Gardiner recommendation. Kieran Nugent was the first prisoner sentenced under the Government's criminalisation policy. His three-year sentence was for possessing weapons and hijacking a car. Claiming political status, he refused to wear prison clothes and was locked down naked covered only by a blanket. His action escalated among his fellow prisoners and hundreds of others eventually followed him onto the 'Blanket Protest'. Initially permitted to wear blankets during the daily exercise period, this 'concession' was withdrawn and they were ordered to exercise either wearing prison uniform or naked. Refusing both options, they were confined to cells twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Unlike the Victorian Crumlin Road Gaol, HMP The Maze was a purpose-built eight hundred cell prison adjacent to the Long Kesh internment camp. Cells were in eight one-storey, self-contained blocks, each in the shape of an 'H', providing four wings served by a central spine. In March 1978 prisoners on the Blanket Protest agreed to wear prison uniforms to enable visits and maintain contact with their loved ones. Relations between prisoners and prison staff remained tense. Following a series of physical attacks

<sup>11</sup> Kew Gardens Materials/Files 4177/1975.2, pp11-18



and persistent harassment by guards, prisoners refused to leave their cells to shower or to use toilets. Although provided with wash basins, access to showers was denied and they refused to wash.

Conflict between prisoners and guards worsened. All cell furniture was removed, leaving prisoners with a blanket, a mattress and a chamber pot. Remaining in their cells, a series of violent assaults on naked prisoners on their way to or from the showers caused the Blanket Protest to escalate into a 'No-Wash' Protest. Not allowed to slop-out contents of their chamber pots, prisoners smeared excrement on the walls of their cells. In February 1980 women prisoners held in Armagh Jail also began 'No-Wash' protests against abuse. Their treatment by guards, particularly the punitive use of strip-searching, resulted in international condemnation most notably by Amnesty International. Attempts to resolve the conflict - by Republican prisoners involved in the protest, church leaders and a European Court case - all failed.

Guards consistently attempted to break the protestors' morale and solidarity. Their methods included: degrading mirror searches whereby prisoners were held naked and spread-eagled above a mirror; intrusive body-cavity searches across a table; denial of access to necessary medical attention; refusal to grant compassionate parole and legal representation at prison adjudications; use of toxic disinfectants and detergents in confined spaces; sleep deprivation caused by operating heavy compressors on occupied prison wings. Other deprivations and assaults included drenching prisoners with fire-hoses, cutting off heating in bitterly cold weather, assaults with scalding water, contaminating food and water with faeces, urine and maggots. Acts of brutality were unpredictable and constant. Prisoners were beaten by guards using fists, boots and batons.

At the time the official discourse, both public and between Government departments, reflected nothing of this reality within the H-Blocks and Armagh. A stark example is a Northern Ireland Office document, dated 26th January 1978 and written by J. P. Irvine to the Secretary of State, recording that 252 men and 21 women were engaged in the Long Kesh and Armagh protests. Quoting from a Report he had received from the Deputy Chief Medical Officer [DCMO] for Northern Ireland he concluded, 'there is no evidence that the physical or mental condition of the protestors is deteriorating as a result of their self-imposed routine'. It was the DCMO's assessment

that 'doctor-patient relationships were normal'; and 'the protestors are provided with adequate food and they eat it; they are clean and free from infestation; they look healthy and are putting on weight rather than wasting away; and they are observed to sleep well'.<sup>12</sup>

Given the extreme deprivations suffered by prisoners, in October 1980 their protest escalated when they began a hunger strike aimed at restoring Special Category Status via five unequivocal demands: 1. The right not to wear a prison uniform; 2. The right not to do prison work; 3. The right of free association with other prisoners to organise educational and recreational pursuits; 4. The right to one visit, one letter and one parcel each week; 5. Full restoration of the remission lost through participation in the Blanket Protest. They were later joined on their hunger strike by three Republican women prisoners in Armagh Jail. The H-Block hunger strike lasted fifty-three days, ending when the British Government appeared to concede to the five demands.

By January 1981 it became clear that this was not the case. Republican prisoners issued a statement accusing the British Government of its failure to resolve the crisis. The hunger strike would be resumed. On 1st March Bobby Sands refused food. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher affirmed the Conservative Government's hard-line position: 'There can be no possible concessions on political status ... If ever one says that a crime which you and I regard as a crime, describe as a crime, and which is a crime, then there's an attempt to say it's not a crime, it's political, then everyone, I'm afraid, would go in fear.'<sup>13</sup> Sixty-six days later, on 5th May 1981, Bobby Sands was the first prisoner to die. By the end of the hunger strike on 3rd October 1981 a further nine men had died.

Between 1976 and 1981 approximately four hundred and fifty men took part in the H-Block Blanket Protest and seventy women in the Armagh Gaol protests. The British State's criminalisation policy exposed the contradiction at the heart of its position. Arrests were made using special powers which permitted the use of 'confessions' obtained by extreme physical force and psychological pressure, resulting in non-jury trial convictions. It amounted to a denial of due process from arrest through to conviction, justified by the State as a necessary response to exceptional circumstances.

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12 Kew Gardens Materials/ Files, CJ4-2213 'Prisoners protesting because they have not been granted Special Category Status', J. P. Irvine, Northern Ireland Office, 30 January 1978

13 BBC Radio News Report, 21 April 1981 accessed: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104501>



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## PART TWO - H-BLOCKS

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### INTRODUCTION

*Now we have the building blocks for good and proper justice. I would like [to establish] that it was definitely from the top, that there was a green light to systematically abuse the prisoners.<sup>14</sup>*

This comment from a Republican prisoner held in the H-Blocks/ HMP Maze 1976-1981 reflects the continuing frustration of prisoners and their families, many of whom have since died, regarding the institutional failure to investigate independently the regimes under which they were incarcerated. The evidence that follows, taken from oral submissions to the Independent Panel, records the systemic abuse of State authority imposed with impunity on politically-affiliated prisoners following the withdrawal of Special Category Status. Evidence gathered and heard by this Panel demonstrates that the Blanket Protest was not initiated by prisoners proactively but reactively as a consequence of the removal of Special Category Status. An academic researcher stated:

*Initially the State introduced Special Category Status because internees were 'special category', otherwise, why were they there? They were not there because they'd breached any law. They hadn't committed any crime ... it's not the prisoners themselves that invoked special category. The State invoked it. Those convicted of crimes by the Diplock Courts, however, also identified as special category as they considered their actions to be political. Removing the status was the State's determination to criminalise what those convicted considered to be politically-motivated acts.*

He continued:

*The Blanket Protest is proposed in many circles these days as if it was a prisoner's choice to wear the blanket. The Blanket Protest, which then moves on to the No-Wash Protest ... [was] not about choice. I do not believe for one minute there was a prisoner through that period who out of choice wanted to be stripped naked, out of choice wanted to smear their cell with excrement. It is not about choice. It's about a clash of politics, of rights, a clash of justice.*

As discussed earlier, the policy of criminalisation was devised to end the 'right' to political status, thus denying prisoners' claims that they had been politically motivated in committing the acts which led to their conviction. A Northern Ireland Office letter, dated 5th December 1975, stated, 'Ending of new admissions to special category status is not just a piece of prison administration: It is a major item of government policy in Northern Ireland'.<sup>15</sup>

Following the abolition of Special Category Status, Republican prisoners experienced a significant change in the attitude of prison guards. In correspondence headed 'Special Category', dated 22nd March 1976, the Director of Prisons for Operations, W. I. Davies, noted that in a meeting with prisoners' representatives, referred to as 'faction leaders', they stated that remand prisoners had reported 'alleged conversations with prison guards in which they [the guards] had adopted a threatening "we are the masters now" attitude'.<sup>16</sup> He recommended that:

The Governor at Belfast [Crumlin Road] will need to keep a tight rein on his staff since it is quite possible and indeed only too understandable that some of them might have regarded [the withdrawal of Special Category Status] as a famous victory and wished to rub the prisoners' noses in it.

Guards in the H-Blocks became overtly threatening and increasingly violent - physically and psychologically; their objective being to break prisoners' resistance and force conformity to the regime.

### ADMISSION TO PRISON

*After I had been sentenced they met me at the gate of the block. It was very, very cold and they handed me a uniform and said, 'Put it on'. I said 'No'. And they made me strip and then they run me and I was being kicked.*

This was the prisoner's first experience of arrival at the H-Blocks; the standard welcome. Admission to the H-Blocks was threatening, particularly for those prisoners who refused to wear prison clothes:

*When you came into the H-Block you were faced with now about ten or fifteen prison officers and*

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14 Throughout this Report the identities of those who gave evidence have been anonymised. The Panel retains the statements of participants and guarantees the accuracy of the quotes used.

15 Memorandum, 5 December 1975, 'Ending of New Admissions to Special Category' The National Archive, CJ 4/2214.

16 Memorandum, 22 March 1976, 'Special Category', The National Archive, CJ4-2213.



*they were there to intimidate you about not going on the protest. They were going around shouting in your face and all of it, you know, verbal abuse ... From there you were led down into the wing. You'd be put in the cell and then the next day the Governor would come round and ask, 'Are you refusing to wear a prison uniform?' I was saying 'Yes!' ... 'And are you refusing to do prison work?' 'Yes! I am refusing to do prison work.' ... From there, there'd be an adjudication. He would stand at the door and then read out what the punishment was. I think it was two weeks' loss of remission, [loss of] two weeks tuck shop, your bed and your blankets and sheets, the whole lot, like, were taken out of the cell and then left there from half seven in the morning and you get them back half seven at night. And that was for three days and that would happen every two weeks. So that was the process, like.*

Arriving at H-Block 4 another prisoner was told to strip. He refused to wear prison clothes and was marched naked to a cell. Assaults began the following day. Two prison guards arrived to escort him to be interviewed by the Governor. He refused, was dragged from his cell, constantly punched, kicked and stamped on by a prison guard wearing steel-heel shoes, injuring his foot. Eventually arriving at the Governor's office, he was ordered him to wear prison clothes. He refused and was assaulted again. The Governor interrupted the assault, stating, 'How good his prison was and that the stories they had heard about beatings, were not true'. The guards were instructed to take him to the medical officer for an examination of his injuries. On returning to his cell a guard asked him for his prison number. He refused to answer, and his head was, 'beaten off a wall'. He was told: 'That's your number there'.

According to a former young prisoner, guards were uncompromising in demonstrating their intention to inflict fear. When first in the Blocks, he was shown a button in his cell that operated a light in the Circle to alert the guards. He was told that if he pressed the button and was not already a 'hospital case' then he 'would be afterwards'. Another prisoner stated that arriving in the H-Blocks he refused to wear the uniform. Walking to his cell he was forced through a gauntlet of kicks and punches from guards. Another stated that from his first day in the Blocks he suffered physical abuse. He was beaten, stripped naked and had his head shaved for not conforming to the prison regime and joining the Blanket Protest. Another prisoner, aged 18 at the time, refused the uniform and then was assaulted, manhandled, slapped and kicked by prison guards.

On entering the H-Blocks a 16-year-old young man was placed in isolation, where he remained

for eight months. Proclaiming his innocence, he stated his conviction was a consequence of being in close proximity to a bomb explosion. He was convicted in a Diplock Court following a severe beating at Derry's Strand Road RUC Station. While the doctor at Strand Road did not note evidence of bruising, the Crumlin Road prison doctor recorded multiple bruises to the young man's body. He made a confession made under duress, but throughout the severe questioning no appropriate adult or legal representative was present. He was the youngest prisoner to participate in the Blanket Protest.

The admission process for male prisoners protesting in the H-Blocks, and for women protesting in Armagh Jail, was consistent in its objective. It signalled that the 'regime' was 'out to get you one way or another'. On reception into prison, the intention was to demonstrate that prisoners' resolve would be broken, their protest thwarted and their political status denied. They would be classified 'ordinary decent criminals', the term used by prison managers and guards for non-politically-affiliated prisoners. In evidence to the Panel a Duty Governor at the time of the first intake of prisoners to the H-Blocks confirmed the strategy:

*It was very clear to us. We were close to it. Whether it was clear outside, I don't know. I think it was. But there was a strategy that in setting up, building the H-Blocks, you would have maximum control ... high-security Blocks. And that was to break the spirit. That was to break the prisoner control that had obviously grown up in the compounds ... And as I say, this view that it was going to change people's views on, you know, keeping Northern Ireland Protestant and Ulster Unionist, or keeping Ireland for Nationalists or Republicans, there was a genuine belief that they could break that. And it was a folly, but it was a deadly folly.*

On admission to the H-Blocks, the immediate imposition of systemic psychological and physical abuse was a stark warning to each prisoner that their commitment to resisting the regime would be broken. Politically motivated, and invoking 'special' or 'emergency' powers, the policy allowed the British Government, via the Prison Service, to breach international human rights standards for the admission and holding of prisoners. In evidence to the Panel, an academic researcher stated that 'total deprivation' in conditions reflected 'total discretion' given to prison guards in admission procedures and the operation of the H-Blocks. From the moment prisoners passed through the prison gates, segregation, twenty-four hour lock-up and restrictions on visits, ended communication with the outside world.

It was suggested to a Consultant Psychiatrist giving evidence to the Panel that ex-prisoners had testified that the procedures adopted, 'were a psychological tool to break prisoners'. He replied:

*I think that's probably a fair comment. I think it could be viewed as a reasonable approach if you are trying to break prisoners. I think violence can break people, but I think, more importantly, it's the threat of violence. I think that when people are under threat and they don't know when the next episode will occur, I think that every time there's any contact and you're concerned that there might be violence in it, that increases any anticipatory anxiety you may have. It's almost a relief when the violence occurs.*

## PHYSICAL ABUSE

Routinely attacked by guards throughout the Blanket Protest, prisoners considered their cells as places of temporary respite and refuge. Whenever they left their cells, and during wing shifts while cells were cleaned, they anticipated sustained physical attacks. Guards administered prolonged beatings on landings while prisoners were moved between locations. Visits from family members, legal representatives, court appearances, attending Mass were vital but they came at a price. Forced temporarily to wear prison clothes, prisoners ran a gauntlet of abuse, violence and traumatic body searches before and after each event. Away from their cells and isolated, prisoners' fate lay in guards' hands and the violence was endemic.

Nineteen at the time, a former prisoner stressed the fear instilled by guards conducting cell and intimate body searches. Attacks were random and unpredictable, but they were methodical: 'guards had carte blanche to abuse prisoners, with not a single restraint in force to stop them'. Located alongside the prison visits area, the 'Romper Room' was used to assault prisoners returning from visits. In the Blocks, prisoners recalled being hit on the head with a 'large book ... like a thick ledger':

*Coming back from visits, there was this large book, like a large, large, heavy book and when people were over the mirror they were getting battered on the head with this book. Just really a step-up of what happened in the cells ... And a number of people left the protest as a result.*

*[Name] had three different big library books, hardback books, and he was banging them to see which one he was going to use. And when I came back from the visit and in to strip off to stand over the mirror, he got on a chair behind me, so he*

*did, with the book and he told me to squat and he started to bang the book over my head.*

*[Name] went out to the circle and brought these like encyclopaedias in, heavy books. We call them 'the heavy book'. He was small. I'm six foot three, so he couldn't hit me from the position he was in, but he brought a chair ... all his life he probably was a mediocre person. I've read about these people, you know, quite mediocre and one day puts the [prison] suit on and the visor of his hat pulled down, he was God. He got on top of the chair with the heavy books and smacked fifty-seven times. And I wouldn't go down. And he kept hitting me, bang, bang, bang. And the thumps that the rest of the wing had to listen to ... then he anal searched you and that was it.*

The frequency and intensity of assaults varied between Blocks, influenced by the Principal Officer in charge. In H-Block 6, one particular Principal Officer and his staff 'would drag us out naked to the Circle to see the Governor'. Prisoners appeared before the Governor at two-week intervals for adjudication regarding their failure to conform to prison rules. One Governor, 'actually stood there while the brutality would take place'. Facing relentless aggression, the will of some prisoners was broken and they withdrew from the protest, thus fulfilling the regime's objective.

Younger prisoners were targeted because of their age and assumed vulnerability. A former young prisoner recalled persistent prolonged physical abuse during wing shifts, mirror searches or any interaction that required him to leave his cell. The severity of his beatings ranged from punches and kicks to being struck repeatedly with batons. He was hit from behind, a punch to the back of his head, collapsing semi-conscious on the floor. The same guard, with others, was involved in another vicious assault on a prisoner as he returned from Mass. The severe beating was witnessed by a Principal Officer who encouraged guards to taunt and torment prisoners before assaults, banging their batons on the cell doors: 'While they were beating me, he kept saying, 'you know, [Name], there's a better way than this, if you would just put on the gear and conform, none of this would happen'. He named eight guards who regularly participated in physical attacks, two of whom were extremely violent: 'In H2, they had a habit of giving you what you called the Red Hand. That was a slap on the back so they could leave the mark of the red hand of Ulster, and they thought this was funny'.

Guards were unconcerned about the severity of injuries inflicted on prisoners. Brutalisation became

routine, as another former prisoner stated: *'Physical abuse was sporadic and regular, just part and parcel of the process. During mirror searches, cell searches and wing shifts, there would always be slaps and kicks, the severity of which depended on which prison officers were there'*. The most severe attacks occurred during wing shifts as cells were cleaned. Prisoners were dragged on their backs across their cells by their beards or hair. In the hot summer of 1978 prisoners smashed their cell windows for air after guards poured strong, undiluted disinfectant under cell doors. The riot squad was deployed, methodically moving from cell to cell beating prisoners with their batons.

Prisoners recalled *'the gauntlet'* while guards carried out cell searches. They were beaten, degraded and humiliated. Aged nineteen at the time, a former prisoner recalled the systemic assaults he had suffered. Guards would *'take off the towel you had round you, pass you onto the next couple like an old chicken and abuse you and kick you up the wing'*. Then twenty-one-years-old, another former prisoner dreaded wing shifts: *'running a gauntlet, with up to fifteen warders beating prisoners with wooden truncheons'*. Attempting to return to his cell he was punched and kicked as he ran naked along a corridor lined with guards. The *'gauntlet'* was a regular occurrence, mentioned by the majority of former prisoners interviewed.

The most violent guards, openly expressing their Loyalism, *'hated prisoners on the Blanket Protest'*. A former prisoner named those guards who committed the worst assaults and also an Assistant Governor who was fully aware of the violence but *'turned a blind eye'*. Violence was relentless before, during and after mirror searches when prisoners were taken naked from their cells and forced to squat for a rectal examination. Regular, prolonged beatings also occurred during wing shifts when prisoners were removed from their cells for cleaning: *'four or five prison officers would drag inmates from their cells, beat them severely for a period of time, then transport them to a different cell'*. Running a *'gauntlet of boots and batons'* a former prisoner, nineteen at the time, recalled reaching his cell, without a mattress or blanket and only a towel for warmth. During such an assault he recalled a fellow prisoner suffering a heart attack and being hospitalised.

Prisoners' evidence to the Panel demonstrated that physical abuse was neither random nor spontaneous. Rather, it was premeditated, organised and conducted with the knowledge and approval of prison governors. The majority of guards administering the beatings were from Unionist or Loyalist backgrounds, often visually evident from *'Loyalist affiliated tattoos*

*on their forearms'*. Institutionalised sectarianism generated helplessness in seeking redress:

*I got a beating so bad and I lay there. Relatives tried to get in to see me and the Governor comes around with the people who gave me the beating and asks me who gave me the beating. Do you understand? Why bring the men who gave you the beating to ask you? The whole thing was corrupt. I think their whole thing was, if they couldn't talk you round, they would beat you into the ground. It became a situation where it was so regular that you sort of accepted it. I came out of jail, but the jail never came out of me and it will stay with me.*

Aged eighteen at the time, a former prisoner recalled the regularity of the physical abuse he endured. It followed a regular pattern – hair-pulling, slapping, punching and kicking – until the prisoner became compliant. The severity of abuse depended on guards' collective mood, often a consequence of events external to the prison such as bombings or shootings. While most abuse was sectarian, the few guards known to be Catholic often *'were every bit as cruel if not more so, feeling that they had a point to prove ... the prison officers felt part of the British establishment and thus, a strong divide from Republican prisoners, which invariably led to deliberate physical abuse'*.

The names of guards who were particularly violent recurred in the testimonies of many former prisoners. Recalling being goaded by a guard who threatened, *'I'm an ex-police officer and I am going to make your life hell'*, a prisoner was then head-butted, kicked and punched. This guard was so violent that his colleague, also a persistent violent perpetrator, would *'panic and try and get him out of the cells'*. Another prisoner named four other guards as being exceptionally aggressive, one of whom *'kept saying to me he was UVF'*. On Christmas Day, he was doused in hot soup and witnessed three guards beating a fellow prisoner. One of the four, his hands bloodied from the beating, walked away laughing. A while later a Governor visited the cells to inquire into the incident. He refused to accept the prisoner's account.

Then twenty-five years old, another former prisoner stated that while on the Blanket Protest he suffered physical abuse weekly. Physical abuse *'was simply a matter of course and was not a punishment for a particular behaviour'*. *'Chokeholds'* were used by guards as a submission method during wing shifts. Eventually, he received *'an out of court claim [settlement] in the 1980s for having been choked in this way'*.

Nineteen at the time, another prisoner commented that abuse, verbal, physical and mental, was routine



in the daily life of the prison. He recalled one occasion at night, while kneeling close to the door of his cell praying, he was scalded when guards threw boiling water under the door. An English guard was nicknamed 'Tyrone' because he directed assaults specifically against prisoners from County Tyrone. Guards were openly Loyalist, one wore a Rangers scarf and spat in his face. He stated, *'the violence went through the roof when the no-wash protest escalated, and excrement was smeared on the walls'*. Several prisoners testified that guards' violence followed a pattern of escalation, from slaps and punches to beatings with batons and banging prisoners' heads against walls.

The institutionalised violence reported in these accounts coincided with a letter, dated 27th April 1977, from Government Minister J.D. Concannon in the Northern Ireland Office.<sup>17</sup> In this letter he questioned whether the H-Block regime should 'toughen up or ease off', concluding:

Our main concern is that with large numbers of men staying on the protest for long periods, there may be a risk of severe deterioration in mental or physical condition ... Any movement on our part to soften the conditions for these men would undoubtedly be seen as showing concern about the problem.

In evidence to the Panel, an academic researcher stated that recruitment of guards from Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist communities ensured that Blanket Protestors were identified as 'other' – meaning, *'from another community, from another place, from another tradition'*. Given the political divide in the North it would have been neither desirable nor possible, nor in the State's interest, to have recruited from Catholic, Nationalist, Republican communities. Not all guards were brutal but the evidence heard by the Panel consistently demonstrated that guards' infliction of severe and arbitrary punishment was generated by sectarianism and fuelled by events outside the prison as the Conflict became more violent.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

Aged twenty at the time, a former prisoner recalled a particularly vindictive and violent guard entering his cell at night while he was sleeping. The guard whispered into his ear, *'Today or tomorrow, you will wear that uniform'*. He sang the same song at the end of every night shift: *'Oh, what a beautiful morning/ Oh, what a beautiful day/ I have a beautiful*

*feeling/ Everything's going my way'*. He would then shout: *'Oh, what a beautiful day. I'll be ready for another day of protest, boys. Then let the protest begin. No tea!'* Prisoners' cell lights were kept on for *'24 hours a day, constant'*. The former prisoner requested that they could be switched off. It proved to be a mistake. The guard who sang threatened him: *'I believe you've a problem with the lights. I'm going to solve that problem. Your lights are going to be turned off for a week ... And he did'*. The guard was not referring to cell lights – the prisoner was given a severe beating.

Lack of compassion dominated the prison regime's operation, from Whitehall to prison governors to prison guards. The psychological impact undoubtedly damaged the Blanket Protestors' mental health. A prisoner denied compassionate leave in 1979 after his brother was killed by the IRA, was told by an Assistant Governor that this was because he refused to abandon the Blanket Protest. Punishing protestors and their families was part of the British Government-led psychological strategy to defeat the Blanket Protest. Former prisoners shared the view that no tactic of psychological abuse was off-limits, consistently stating that it had far greater and longer-lasting impact than physical assaults. They demonstrated determination within the regime to break the will of prisoners, causing intense 'mental anxiety'. Prisoners lived in a permanent state of alert: *'The fear and anticipation of abuse or physical brutality was often worse than the actual acts ... a type of mental torture hearing your fellow inmates getting beaten and waiting on your turn'*.

Having suffered lice infestation, prisoners faced guards drumming and rattling buckets to signal that forced washes were about to happen. The anticipation of physical violation through forced washing was so intense that it was *'a big relief actually when you got it over and done with'*. Similarly, with beatings as *'the fear and the waiting on a beating'* was constant, a persistent threat that caused high levels of anxiety. Ever-present, it was and has remained for many former prisoners 'disastrous', with some never fully recovering.

A young prisoner described that when leaving his cell or taking his visits *'all manner of physical and emotional abuse and emotional degradation was used as a tool in order to further upset prisoners'*. Guards constantly made derogatory comments about his mother and father, who had passed away. Because he would not wear the prison uniform he

<sup>17</sup> Kew Gardens Materials/ Files, 4177/176-3 Review of the state of play on the anti-Special Category protestors in the prisons. Paper to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, 27 April 1977.

had been refused compassionate leave to attend either funeral. The day his father died was the day the Hunger Strikes began. After enduring a mirror search, he was *'trailed'* from his wing to the Principal Officer's office where he was thrown to the floor. The Principal Officer said coldly, *'We got word last night that your father had died. Take him back to his cell'*. The guards then sang, *'[Name]'s lost his da'*.

Following the death of another prisoner's sister, killed by a plastic bullet, the devastating news was broken to him at 3am. In his cell, he was wakened from sleep by a guard who asked, *'Have you got a sister called [Name]?'* He replied, *'No, it's [Name]'*. The guard replied, *'Close enough. She's dead'*, then closed the cell door and left. The prisoner was denied compassionate leave to attend her funeral. These painful experiences of bereavement, purposefully exacerbated by the contempt shown to bereaved prisoners, illustrate clearly how guards used every opportunity, including the deaths of loved ones, to break prisoners' resolve. It is well illustrated in the following quote:

*The most distressing element of imprisonment ... was the psychological abuse ... sustained through long periods of social isolation, fear of physical abuse, which invariably led to stress and anxiety, and was unrelenting for the entire protest.*

The 24-hour lock up, compounded by the constant threat of physical assault, led one prisoner to hallucinate that he was sinking through the floor, cell walls closing in, while his name was being whispered repeatedly. The overwhelming anxiety and distress severely affected his eating. Psychological distress from the *'harrowing conditions'* twice forced him to leave the protest. Threats to prisoners' families, in addition to those made against themselves, left them *'psychologically tortured, due to the constant fear of violence'*. A former prisoner recalled guards opening his cell door at night, then detailing the violence they would inflict the following day. Such constant threats created intense levels of anxiety and anticipation, leaving him unable to sleep. Fear and sleep deprivation were compounded by guards' refusal to switch off cell lights at night.

Former prisoners recalled being *'mentally abused through the constant threat of violence as well as the psychological abuse by prison officers'*. On one occasion a guard taunted a prisoner by showing him a newspaper report of the killing of his friends in an SAS operation. Another former prisoner stated that cells were hosed down during the night, freezing cold water soaking sleeping prisoners. Several former prisoners recounted victimisation by drunk guards, laughing and mocking as they put the hose through

cell doors in the early hours. This occurred also during the day on the whim of guards. Subjected to sectarian name-calling, guards' verbal abuse focused on religion. Sectarian hatred was particularly strong when prisoners prayed. Guards drummed on cell doors with their batons shouting insults about the *'Virgin Mary, the Pope and priests'*. The constant threat of physical violence in the context of 24-hour lock ups and just one 30-minute visit each month, *'incubated feelings of anxiety and stress'*.

Guards' verbal abuse, ranging from personal insults to threats against prisoners' families, amounted to persistent harassment. It took other forms. Aged twenty at the time, a former prisoner recalled a guard handing him a letter. The envelope was empty, the letter had been removed and destroyed. The worst incidents, however, occurred at night when guards had *'a drop of drink in them'*. They had access to prisoners' personal files and reminded them that they knew their families' home addresses. This *'was just another way of them trying to break us'*. Verbal abuse *'became part of the daily routine'*.

The Blanket Protest was *'mental torture ... 24 hours a day looking at a white wall with nothing to read'*. It was particularly challenging at the beginning of the protest; alone in a cell, adjoining cells left vacant to prevent communication. A former prisoner recalled nine months in these conditions, at night overtly sectarian guards constantly disturbing his sleep and compounding his *'mental anguish'*. Another former prisoner named a guard who *'took delight'* in playing psychological mind games. He would ask prisoners, *'How are your kids?'*, saying, *'I saw a letter from your wife, but you are not getting it'*. Such personal comments were accompanied by sectarian abuse and sleep deprivation. In addition to hosing cells at night, guards banged on doors and played loud music when they heard prisoners attempting to communicate with each other.

Guards used a machine to drain the wing of urine, operating it at night to prevent prisoners from sleeping. The guards put the machine *'in the middle of the wing and they would walk off'*. It was a regular occurrence and a particular guard *'had a delight in doing it, but he's dead now. He took his own life a few years ago'*. Switching lights on and off at night, persistent noise and abuse, and threats of beatings, left prisoners *'extremely distressed'*. Sleep deprivation, physical beatings and psychological abuse had a common purpose of pressuring the protestors to end the Blanket Protest. Another former prisoner stated: *'It was only in the evenings, when the guards had left the wings, that prisoners could gain any sense of relief from that anxiety'*.



In his testimony, a former prisoner reported the long-term psychological impact of the treatment he had endured. He and another former prisoner named three guards at the centre of inflicting sleep deprivation. They entered cells at night, often every hour, *'so it made sense to sleep with your back to the wall'*. Using a tape recorder one of the guards played recordings from porn movies. He taunted prisoners, telling them he had passed their details to the *'UVF and the UDA'*, and that *'members of your family had died and he read your letters'*.

Asked about ex-prisoners' allegations that Protestant paramilitary prisoners were used as orderlies, a former Governor stated:

*So, I mean, yeah, that happened. And you can't justify it where you use a prisoner in that way to agitate or irritate another prisoner ... They would have used INLA prisoners to agitate Provos. They would have put them in the Punishment Block together. They would have done lots of things to really create tension, and it was in my mind unacceptable.*

This anxiety was compounded by preventing communication with family and loved ones, resulting in helplessness, solitude and abandonment. A former prisoner remembered the feeling of isolation and polarisation he and other prisoners endured while on the Blanket Protest. He recalled a conversation with his cell-mate *'Nobody really cares about us, do they? We just mean nothing'*. His cell-mate responded:

*The only people we need to rely on now is ourselves. We're brothers. We have to rely on ourselves now. We have to fall back on our own resources. Nobody out there cares. And, see, even if they did realise what was going in here, no one would believe it anyway. So it was like ... totally isolated. Totally, just completely.*

## GUARDS AND ALCOHOL

In evidence to the Panel, former prisoners named ten guards and a Governor regularly under the influence of alcohol while on duty. Alcohol-related violence was *'endemic'*, compounded by the presence of a *'social club on-site in Long Kesh in which many of the prison officers would drink and then come to work with their shifts on the Block'*. Beatings, degrading treatment and psychological abuse increased as these guards became *'more unpredictable and dangerous'*. Another former prisoner stated: *'You could smell alcohol off them, and they were often more aggressive when drunk'*. The time of day was significant:

*In the afternoon there would have been a completely different attitude to the prisoners than there would have been first thing in the morning*

*... a lot more aggressive behaviour coming back from lunch and I think they had been out having a drink.*

The severity of the assaults and violence depended on the guards' mood, influenced significantly by alcohol. Eighteen years old at the time a former prisoner recalled a systemic and prolonged attack at approximately 10pm one evening when guards went from cell to cell beating prisoners. Six or seven guards entered his shared cell instructing him and his cell-mate to stand in a corner. Both were punched and kicked until they collapsed. The guards, fuelled by alcohol, clearly enjoyed the brutality: *'you heard them laughing in the staff quarters'*.

When guards were drunk and violent, *'some of them were actually foaming at the mouth, honestly'*. Particular guards, named in the testimonies of different prisoners, took beatings *'to a different level'*. Some were openly members of the Orange Order and their sectarian hatred, fuelled by heavy drinking, aggravated verbal abuse and escalated violent attacks. Sectarianism was used with *'enthusiasm in confronting the protesting prisoners in the fashion that they did'*. A former prisoner recalled a beating by a *'drunk screw'*, who broke his cell mate's nose. He was then dragged to the canteen, where four other guards continued the beating, scalding his body with hot tea. Throughout these attacks guards consistently referred to prisoners as *'Fenian bastards and Provo bastards'*.

The following quote from a former prisoner reflects on the impasse regarding the Blanket Protest:

*I think they were in jail more than us. That's the impression I got. They were more fearful than us because I think they knew what they were doing was wrong. I think that after a while they knew we weren't going to crumble and put on prison uniforms.*

Reflecting on the mind-set of the perpetrators, a Doctor with extensive experience in identifying and treating post-traumatic stress among ex-military and prison staff testified about the pressures experienced by guards who feared Republican attacks on their lives:

*In general terms, the prison officers would have been largely recruited from the Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist community. Any prison services, police services, armies, paramilitary groupings, do tend to recruit certain types of people. People who would probably be more inclined to have aggressive tendencies, so they have a legitimate workplace where they can maybe release those tendencies. In the prison service here, I think additionally the prison officers would*

*clearly have viewed the Republican prisoners as the enemy, the enemy of their community first of all and also to being enemies of prison officers. I know a lot of the prison officers who I have seen certainly would have tended to drink a lot in the prison bars, where I understand the drink was very, very cheap. For the prison officers, it was a very stressful job, they were under threat, particularly at certain times and that was a means for them to release their stress because it was safe to drink there, depending on where they lived. It wasn't safe to drink and socialise elsewhere. I know that some of them would have drunk alcohol either during a break in their shifts or before their shifts. So, on occasion, I suppose prison officers would have been intoxicated while they were working. Obviously, intoxication is going to release inhibitions we might have in relation to all sorts of things including aggression.*

A former prison Governor confirmed the Doctor's testimony, stating that some guards relied on alcohol in doing their job:

*Not only was there a bar in the prison there was then also the Sergeant's Mess because of the Army camp. So, the staff also had access to the bar in the Army camp. And because the drink was all subsidised ... You know, also at that time you need to remember that a lot of staff were having difficulty with fulfilling their role. They were under a lot of pressure. You know, there's prison officers being murdered, a lot of marriage breakdowns, a lot of suicides among staff, you know. So, the drink for some of them was the crutch to get them into work. And that has since been recognised, I feel, by the Service because now there's a clear no-drink policy.*

## **PUNISHMENT REGIMES**

### **Hygiene**

Describing Long Kesh Internment Camp prior to 1976, a former prison Governor likened it to Second World War prisoner-of-war camps in Europe and Japan:

*We managed the Kesh with soldiers on the perimeter all the time. They maintained external security and we were supposed to try and run the thing inside ... you had one or two people patrolling. In the next perimeter, you had dogs patrolling. And then in the external, you had the military ... up until 1976 there's no doubt men had control over the compounds and you maintained order by agreement. You came up with ordinary sensible agreements over food. We put out loaves and basics, but we didn't feed them. They made*

*their own food. And it was pretty grim, but it was the only way you could run the situation. You couldn't have prison officers going in to feed 80 men in a compound. It wouldn't have been safe. Even if we could have managed it, even if we had had the staff to do it, it just wouldn't have made any sense.*

The situation was 'horrendous ... You daren't call it a war camp, but that's what it was to a large extent'.

Following on from the deprivations of Long Kesh, ostensibly prison conditions changed as the adjacent new prison was purpose-built, replacing the Nissan huts. As established above, the abolition of Special Category Status and the subsequent Blanket Protest led to a significant hardening of the regime, more punitive conditions and a total breakdown in relations between prisoners and guards. When prisoners on the Blanket emptied contents of chamber pots under their doors and onto the landings it was swept back into the cells. They recalled that guards regularly urinated under the doors. A former prisoner recalled that after prisoners had left chamber pots on the landing for collection guards brushed excrement into the cell under the door. They power-hosed under doors, soaking mattresses on the cell floor. Cells were 'degrading and inhuman'. Prisoners had no washing facilities, no possibility of communication and no reading material. They were left, 'basically lying on a concrete floor for years'.

When the No-Wash Protest began, the regime introduced the brutal practice of forced washing. A former prisoner stated that many 'extra prison officers were brought in for the operation'. Operational prison officers were 'hyped up', entering all the cells and forcibly shaving and washing prisoners who were on the protest. Naked, he was dragged along the wing's hallway, beaten with boots and batons, forced onto a chair where his beard and hair were hacked, not for medical reasons but to 'degrade' him. He was then thrown into a bath. Three or four guards scrubbed him with coarse decking brushes, covering him in white powder and repeatedly submerging him under the disinfected water.

### **H-Block 3 (H3) and Young Prisoners**

*When you go into prison young, the judge sentences you to loss of liberty. He never sentenced me to a life of brutality and mental and physical abuse. This was coming from, in my belief, not the screws, but the NIO and higher above. But they were getting away with this because, in the same situation, nobody believed that the Germans were massacring Jews and other people. Because they had us confined in a space, cutting out our*

*communication and all, that they were getting away with it. I have hatred for them. I'm not saying any different and I can't get rid of it.*

A former prisoner, held in H3 when he was eighteen, stated that he was threatened by guards: *'we could do youse, you know ... we have youse here and we can do what we want with youse'*. He continued:

*The culture of abuse had an unprovoked and random quality to it, for there was nothing that the prisoners may have had in their cell or on their person to warrant such intensive assaults ... the prison authorities had singled out H3 ... as an experimentation ground to effectively break the will of the prisoners. This particular Block contained a majority of younger prisoners and ... there was a strategy attempt to isolate and focus on defeating the protest by undermining it with the youngest and, so they thought, most inexperienced prisoners being forced off the protest.*

Prisoners housed in H3 were the youngest, some just seventeen. In evidence to the Panel, they claimed there was a policy-driven, concerted effort to target younger prisoners on the assumption that they would be more easily broken and abandon the Blanket Protest. A former prisoner, incarcerated at eighteen, was housed in the adult wing of H-Block 3. He was relieved to be with adult prisoners because younger prisoners were so heavily assaulted *'when the protest kicked off properly'*. The assaults on younger prisoners were aimed at ending their protest *'as quickly as they possibly could'*. The beatings were cowardly:

*In the other wings, it was grown men, physically capable of looking after themselves.*

*The brutality they inflicted on boys in that wing, in particular, especially when the protest kicked off properly with the no-wash. They were absolutely ruthless with them. Their intention was to break the younger prisoners as quickly as they possibly could. They set about doing that and they were ruthless in how they went about it ... the logic that they were applying, well, 'We will experience less resistance from the younger ones because they are what they are - young prisoners'.*

An older prisoner informed the Governor that young prisoners were being physically abused by guards:

*...the young prisoners were getting beat up by the screws and that there so one day I decided that I would go to the Governor. It was never heard tell of because you were supposed to cow down and be frightened. So, I went to the Governor and the PO [Principal Officer] was there, I don't remember his name. And I explained to the Governor about*

*the young prisoners being beat up. He asked me what wing I was in. I said, 'A-wing' and he said, 'What's it got to do with you?'.*

He told the Governor he would publicise the guards' treatment of young prisoners. The Governor agreed to investigate the assaults. Yet regular beatings and psychological abuse continued, breaking the will of some prisoners who left the protest.

Young prisoners were constantly demeaned:

*... they had a pee pot for going to the toilet in the cell and they went and got a baby one, you know a pink one and that was mine. They were making fun of you because you were young.*

Asked in evidence to the Panel whether younger prisoners were targeted deliberately, a Doctor commented that according to research into *'repeated trauma'* older prisoners were *'more resilient and more likely to cope'*. Targeting was confirmed by a former Governor's testimony:

*It feels familiar. I can't say that it's absolutely my reflection of what I saw. You will always go for vulnerable people, and younger people are generally more vulnerable than someone who has been hardened in their beliefs - right beliefs or wrong beliefs. But you always go for the younger person or person with a weakness or a person with mental illness. Generally speaking, you will try and go for people who haven't been embedded in their Loyalism or Republicanism for fifteen years. That, I am quite sure, did happen.*

The physical and psychological abuse, designed to break prisoners' unity and will, became institutionalised. It cemented, as one former prisoner stated, a *'culture of violence'*:

*It was policy-driven and due to the policy employed to break the prisoners. It gave carte blanche to treat the prisoners in any way they saw fit. The nature of such a climate of violence, hate and fear had a detrimental impact on many prisoners and stress and anxiety levels were ever-present. Allied with the beatings, the emotional and mental abuse was the deliberate policy of supplying the prisoners with a low standard of food and nutrition.*

On arriving in H3 a former prisoner recalled that mattresses were removed from cells between 7am and 7pm. Over Christmas 1977 he and his cell-mate were beaten by several guards and on other occasions assaults were random. Given that the cells were stripped bare, he was contemptuous of claims that cell searches were necessary: *'there was nothing in the cell to search, just a man and a blanket'*. Cell



searches, however, gave guards the opportunity to exert violence on prisoners once they were away from their cells, subjecting them to mirror searches and treating them *'like a punch bag'*.

He recalled going to the *'Circle'*, the central area of the Block, to be seen by a medical officer. The circle was the *'prison officers' domain'*, a place to be feared. Occasionally, he claimed, Loyalist prisoners assisted the guards in the assaults on Republican prisoners. Physical abuse occurred daily, intensifying over time:

*From my point of view... these guys, as individuals, were looking at it through sectarianism, hatred of republicanism ... Some were worse than others. But the more we find out about what was going on, the more it seems that everything that they done, and it seems down to the last detail, was co-ordinated and planned by a higher policy.*

One Principal Officer, in particular, was named consistently as overseeing and participating in the brutality within H3. Described by former prisoners as a *'sadist'*, on one occasion, following a table search and without provocation, he had *'smashed the back of his hand' into a prisoner's 'head and busted his whole nose'*. The Principal Officer was prominent in the Prison Officers' Association and former prisoners believed this afforded protection to him and his colleagues.

#### **H-Block 4 (H4)**

*They were able to control every aspect of our lives. They fed us when they felt like it. They beat us when they felt like it. They hosed us down when they felt like it. They mirror searched us when they felt like it. And they had all this at their disposal. They had all that arsenal ...*

In his testimony, a former prisoner recalled a conversation with the Principal Officer discussed previously. The Officer warned:

*Forget about [prison number]. I'm going to call you [prisoner's first name] and you can call me [Principal Officer's first name] ... Now you are going into that uniform [prison clothes]. And do you know why? Because you are worse than an ODC [Ordinary Decent Criminal]. Youse are neither NCP's [Non-Conforming Prisoners] or traitors or just simply tramps. No, youse are animals and we treat you as such. And you behave like animals. And I am going to break you.*

The former prisoner stated that he was changed forever by the cruelty of the *'Sadistic Branch'*:

*They taught the ABC of hatred. I've never hated in my life. I didn't even hate the British Army. When I went in there I didn't hate, and that particular branch taught me the ABC of hatred. And I did. I was filled with hatred.*

In October 1979 the Principal Officer and others *'sandbagged'* his wing. They hosed the cells with freezing water to a depth that reached prisoners' shins, shouting *'Enjoy your protest boys, I'm off'*. Prisoners were left until 7am the next morning.

He was relocated from H5 to H4 and called a *'Provo tramp'* by the guard escorting him. On arrival in H4, six officers were waiting. He was kicked, punched, stamped on and slammed to the ground. Another Principal Officer attempted to grab his testicles during the assault. Beaten unconscious, when he finally awoke, a guard told him: *'Don't get up again, son, or they'll kill you'*. On hearing this another guard, whom he named, returned with his baton drawn and struck a severe blow to the prisoner's face.

A young prisoner, sixteen years old at the time, was allocated to H4:

*Every day you were getting beat or hosed or just psychological. If it didn't happen to you, it was happening to someone else. You were sitting in your cell and you could hear them coming down and you knew somebody was going to get a beating or a cell search. During cell search, you got beatings. You were just waiting every day. If it wasn't you that day, it was you the next day ... it happened all the time.*

As each attempt to break the will of the protesting prisoners failed, *'torture tactics'* escalated. A former prisoner recalled a guard proclaiming that a Governor had given them *'free reign'* to break the protest in the five months leading up to Christmas. From that moment, *'all normal rules and regulations were put to one side'* with guards holding a *'blank cheque for brutality against the prisoners'*.

The *'threat of violence'* was *'ever-present'*:

*It wasn't affecting me directly. It was affecting other prisoners on the wing during the course of a normal day. That's just one thing, it was a regular occurrence. The wing shifts, the brutality, mirror searches, all those things were a constant feature of life during the protest years. They were daily, I think that's the point I'm making.*

Another former prisoner stated that whenever he left his cell he was beaten with *'fists, boots and batons'*. He continued:

*It was about August 1978 when we got moved. We heard through a visit that the protest had*

*been stepped up in terms of refusing to put our plates at the door and throwing food in the corner and within hours we found ourselves moved to the H-Blocks. Initially, the relief of getting out of solitary was felt by all of us. It was in the aftermath that you realised that you may have been moved from a situation where you were psychologically being damaged to a situation where you were being physically tortured on a regular basis.*

Beatings occurred 'sometimes twice a day' in a 'concerted effort to break the wing and therefore break the protest'. Cell 26 'was where they put you while they searched your cell'. It was where guards' assaults were most severe.

*The screams and yells affected you the most ... it ramped up, you know, each day you were getting a cell search ... you were taken out and up into Cell 26. And that could have been twice a day. And that was stood over the mirror and that was beating. That was whenever the urine was in the custard. That's when the maggots were in the dinner. And it sort of ramped itself up 'til culminating in that day of the forced wash, forced hair cutting and that there. It just seemed to be for that period of time [three weeks] ... It wasn't so intense after but it still happened ... you were still getting brutalised.*

## FORMS OF ABUSE

*And I think the thing to remember is, you know, it was the ideal sort of playground for a number of prison officers. We could have always looked outside of the door and you could see someone who would be starting off and was very clearly just new to the Prison Service and very intimidated and very nervous going down the wings ... And he'd be shown around by his colleagues and told 'This is how you do it'. And he just observed that behaviour. I'm interested in watching people's behaviour and seeing how they changed over a period of weeks ... the nervousness goes ... and then the cuffs get rolled up and the peak of the cap gets slashed and steel bits go on the heels and suddenly there's a swagger and all because suddenly they realise this was something ... That they couldn't behave in that way outside, you know. In the sense [beyond the prison] they were nonentities.*

### Strip searches

Strip searches are used in prisons or other locations where authorities have 'reasonable suspicion' to suspect that banned substances or items are hidden

about or within the body. They vary in degree and intensity, from a non-contact, visual review of a naked body to intimate body and cavity searches with fingers and probes. Regularly used in all places of detention they are open to abuse, in their intensity and regularity and also in the psychological and physical harm they induce. They were used consistently and vigorously in the H-Blocks and in Armagh Jail. Their frequency, violence and violation amounted to institutionalised conduct that systemically breached prisoners' rights, inflicting cruel and inhuman treatment.

Strip searches, including anal mirror searches, occurred randomly but also before and after prisoners attended Sunday Mass. A former prisoner recalled the sexual assault of his cell-mate, dragged from the cell by guards in riot gear. He returned to the cell 'badly beaten', stating that a guard had 'inserted a pen up his backside'. It was then his turn. Taken by guards from the cell he was forced to 'spread-eagle'. A guard, whose fearsome reputation for brutality has been discussed above, entered the room and asked 'what was happening'. Told that the prisoner was refusing an order, the guard smashed the prisoner's head and face against the wall. Guards then lifted him off the floor, spread his buttocks, and threw him down once again.

Such brutality dissuaded many prisoners from accepting visits from their families and loved ones. Anticipating severe assault, a former prisoner interviewed stated that as a consequence he did not take visits for four years. When eventually he attended his first visit, he was taken to an unfamiliar area of the prison where he was strip-searched by guards, one of whom forcefully inserted gloved fingers into his anus and then into his mouth.

### Table searches

Table searches were particularly vicious. Prisoners were held face-down across a table, their anus probed. Guards then roughly put their fingers in prisoners' mouths while other guards twisted and punched their testicles. The table searches were 'inhuman and degrading', guards using pliers and flash lamps. Failure to comply resulted in 'severe physical abuse' with guards forcibly throwing prisoners across tables, their faces hitting the surface, and then holding them down. A former prisoner recalled being dragged by his head over a table by several guards who beat him until he was flat out:

*They grabbed you by the hair and tried to bang your head off the table so your natural reaction was to put your hands on the table. Then when you done that, two screws grabbed your back legs*

*and one held one leg and the other held the other and you had a screw with a white coat in front of you and he says, 'I'm a medical officer and I'm qualified to check your back passage', and then would probe my back passage.*

Another former prisoner recalled a table search in September 1978 when he was grabbed by his hair, hands held behind his back, lifted then dropped by five guards, his face 'bashed' on the table. Searching his mouth, a guard with a notorious reputation hit him in the face with a black torch because he had not opened his mouth sufficiently wide. He named a medical officer who was present but who had attempted to remain out of view. During table searches, guards pulled prisoners' legs apart, 'prodding your backside with their fingers ... we classed that as sexual assault'.

### Mirror searches

In November 1979, the Northern Ireland Office rejected allegations of serious assault during strip searches: 'there is no truth whatsoever that prison staff have ill-treated protesting prisoners or indulged in systematic brutality against them'.<sup>18</sup> The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) outlined guidelines for mirror searches. The NIO stated that prison governors believed prisoners regularly concealed weapons, 'in a pouch hidden in the rectum'. Thus, 'when a prisoner is searched, only an external visual examination of the rectum is made by prison officers using a floor mirror'. According to former prisoners, this was untrue and the introduction of mirror searches led to an intensification of ill-treatment reflecting a 'deliberate policy'. Guards kicked and punched prisoners until they squatted above a mirror and, as stated above, they inserted gloved fingers violently in the prisoner's anus and then in his mouth. In H4 assaults took place in 'Cell 26', known also as the 'Romper room' accompanied by a 'tirade of personal abuse'.

A former prisoner stated that mirror searches were 'just another form of degradation':

*They stripped you naked and then you had to squat over the mirror, that was the whole idea of it. When we refused to do that it was up to the screws how they handled that. Some of them would just kick your knees so you fell on top of the mirror, others would just beat you until you did. They would physically slap you about, trail you down by the hair.*

Mirror searches were as frequent as wing shifts but were also conducted daily when prisoners attended legal visits. A former prisoner estimated that as many as five guards participated in violent mirror searches which often had what he termed a 'sexual nature'. He describes being 'spread-eagled' over a mirror squeezed by his testicles and his anus penetrated, justified as 'looking for stuff'. Penetration was not limited to fingers but improvised medical tools 'like pliers' were also used. On one occasion he was left bleeding and the severe treatment was not prevented by senior guards who were present throughout the assault.

While prisoners endured physical assaults they recognised that this was part of a deliberate process of humiliation and degradation. A former prisoner recalled an occasion when guards claimed the mirror search indicated he had something concealed in his rectum. Naked, he was taken to an isolation cell, held upside down and guards inserted pliers into his rectum. Nothing was found. The frequency and pattern of abuse stories resound throughout the accounts of the Blanket Protestors. In their testimonies to the Panel, every former prisoner detailed the humiliation and brutality of mirror searches.

### Forced washes

*You probably heard it all before. You ran a gauntlet between the rows of screws, batons and boots. Dragged naked, put into a bath with loads of disinfectant in it. Then they scrubbed you with deck scrubbers and then you were bleeding and the disinfectant went into your skin and made it worse. Then taking you out of the bath and holding you down and then partially shaving your head. You would have a big long bit of hair here, then shaved, then cuts all over your head. I remember going out on a visit after a forced wash and my mother she seen me and she started to cry and then she started to shout stuff at the screws and the visit was stopped. There was no-one walked away with a clean haircut. Psychologically again it was just warfare, cutting part of your head.*

*They really didn't care what they were doing. You couldn't dodge out of the way because there were four or five prison officers, well built, and there were we, naked, maybe seven or eight stone in weight. They were sitting on you, holding you down. They actually held your mouth open and would start to shave your beard and your head and that.*

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<sup>18</sup> Kew Gardens Materials/ Files, CJ4/2723, Northern Ireland Prisons: The Current Protest Campaign Against Refusal by the Authorities to Grant "Special Category Status" to Convicted Prisoners. Northern Ireland Office, November 1979



These two accounts demonstrate how forced washes followed by painful rough shaving were used as *'a psychological baton to cause anxiety in prisoners'*. A climate of fear was generated as guards went cell to cell, beating prisoners and dragging them onto landings. A former prisoner recalled seven or eight guards entering his cell, ferociously kicking and punching him, then dragging him out naked. The corridor was lined with guards beating him as he was trailed along, then forced onto a chair, punched to the floor and lifted back. Using razors the guards *'hacked'* his head and face. He was plunged several times into a bath, his arms behind his back. There was blood in the bath from the previous prisoner. Guards scrubbed his skin raw with a deck scrubber, removing blood and hair from his face and body. Finally, he was lathered with a *'white paste'*. Another account named a guard feared for his brutality, who grabbed the prisoner's genitals with gloved hands. The assailant was told by one of the other guards that he didn't object to the violence inflicted on the prisoner, but warned, *'No gay stuff!'*

A former prisoner was caught concealing tobacco as he was escorted back from a visit. He stated the guard kicked him *'the whole way to H4'* where he was assaulted again and transported in a van to the *'Boards'*. He was dragged by his hair and arms and thrown into a cold bath. A guard squeezed his testicles so fiercely that he almost lost consciousness. His chest was scrubbed with a hard-floor scrubber. A *'Class Officer'* saw the wheals on his chest and asked what had happened. A medical officer was called. His arrival had no impact and the forced wash continued. He recalled *'white cream'* being used on his body, burning his skin. As in this case, the endurance and memory of forced washes have caused prisoners intense suffering, flash-backs and long-term psychological damage.

A former prisoner recalled a night in December 1978 when a *'prison officer who was quite friendly with us'* warned prisoners that they would be forcibly washed the following day. Guards arrived at his cell shouting that he was to see the Doctor. He replied, *'I don't want to see a doctor'*. Dragged from his cell, he was kicked and stamped on until he reached *'Cell 26'*. He was told he had to wear a prison uniform. He refused and was beaten, his face bruised and bleeding, and was then dragged to the Doctor's office. A medical officer, who was also a guard, was standing in the office. The prisoner was bleeding from his nose. Without examination, the medical officer said, *'Lice. Wash'*. The prisoner asked, *'What about my face?'* *'Get him out!'* was the reply. He was dragged back down the wing, his hair and beard forcibly shaved: *'They were cutting lumps*

*out of you'*. Forced into a bath of *'ice cold water'*, his head was held under. He fought desperately to breathe while guards were *'laughing and joking'*. Scrubbed with deck scrubbers, he was dragged back to the Principal Officer's office who told him, *'This is nothing personal against you. If anybody is told to get washed, they'll be washed'*.

Former prisoners contested claims that they had fleas or lice. Yet forced washes continued on the orders of the prison doctor. The water temperature varied from freezing cold to scalding hot and washes became feared; *'all you could think about throughout the next week was the next wash'*. Prisoners on the protest were not permitted to leave cells without wearing at least part of the prison uniform. A former prisoner recalled guards forcing a pair of trousers on him, then carrying him by his arms and legs:

*By the time I reached the Circle my trousers were round my ankles and I was naked anyway. They just threw me into a van and drove me down and threw me into a bath. There was a sign up saying 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness' written over the bath. The first bath was total chalk disinfectant, cold water and they threw me into the bath and scrubbed me with brushes and then they turned me over and scrubbed me with a toilet brush between my buttocks. I was ordered to be given a bath at three o'clock every Wednesday and when that first one was over, the only thing I could think about was next Wednesday at three o'clock. From the minute I woke up in the morning 'til I went to bed at night. I felt almost like a condemned man facing his execution.*

When he had his second forced wash he was on the *'boards'*. The guards ordered him to leave his cell. He refused, they dragged him out. While on the floor another guard came at him with an Alsatian dog. The guard was screaming, *'Get up, get up, you wee fucker you. Do you think we have nothing better to do than carry you about naked all day?'* He refused to stand and a medical officer dragged him by his hair along the rough tarmac floor. They threw him into a scalding hot bath. He screamed and *'they just laughed'*. Two weeks later he had a third bath and it was *'absolutely perfect. You see I was expecting either cold or hot, it was all psychological. It was all psychological, the whole thing'*.

The violence accompanying forced washes was sustained and feared:

*You see most blanket men only got ordered one bath, but the doctor ordered that I had a bath on Wednesday at three o'clock. After the first one was over, I had to wait a week for the next one knowing it was going to happen at three o'clock*

*again. My every thought was dominated from waking in the morning to late at night with next Wednesday.*

In evidence, numerous prisoners stated that a doctor or medical orderly instructed delousing without carrying out even cursory examinations. The use of disinfectants was justified as being for the prisoners' benefit but the process was cruel and painful. Decades on, many former prisoners were distressed as they detailed their humiliating subjugation.

## Shaving

Claiming hygiene and infection control as justification, during the 'No-Wash Protest' prison medical officers shaved prisoners' hair and beards. It was experienced by prisoners as another act of humiliation. Carried out by orderlies, doctors also were involved in the process:

*The first time it happened we went to the doctor. We actually went into the doctor's office and I think it was Doctor [name]. He went through your hair and stuff like that there. And I don't know if he gave a nod or signs - and that was you. You were processed through him. That didn't happen all the time, but it happened on the first occasion and then we were put into the bath.*

The following statement confirmed the harsh, punitive indignity of the process:

*So, I sat down on the ground again and they trailed me out up a wing, put me on a chair, a wee chair like this, in the middle of the wing, held me down in the chair, and they got shears then, barber's shears, and they started shaving my hair off and my beard. And then they trailed me into the toilets, and they got a razor. It was cold water doing it. And they were trying to shave me. They were cutting lumps out of you.*

## Sexual assault

Several former prisoners considered that particular guards threatened and committed sexual assault. According to a psychiatrist who gave evidence to the Panel, intimate body searches have a profound impact on prisoners; constituting a 'narrative for rape'. As the following incident demonstrates, certain assaults were beyond 'narrative':

*It was Christmas and by the time they got to my cell they were drunk ... There were two boys drunk and I was only wearing a towel and the only thing they seemed to be interested in was getting the towel off me. I swear I felt sexually threatened. This drunken man, I thought he was going to rape me ... I just tried to keep the towel*

*on me, but they got it off me and they battered me about, threw me on the bed, threw me on the chair. They got me up against the wall naked and that boy [Name] only punched me once in the ribs and I collapsed and fell on the ground and the boy who I thought was getting some sexual kick out of it. I felt sexually threatened. He got me by the pubic hairs and my penis and got his fingers like that and he stuck them into my chest and he kept roaring at me as I was lying on the ground, 'Next time I come into this cell you better be wearing this prison uniform' and then they went out.*

Another former prisoner recalled an assault he 'feared' would lead to rape. It 'lasted twenty minutes and I really did feel sexually threatened both the alcohol involved and the way one of them seemed to be sexually aroused'.

A former prisoner described a forced wash that occurred in December 1978. Returning from a visit, he was assaulted with shears, his head 'shaved to the bone, whilst being beaten'. He was then taken to another block where a guard was waiting, a cleaning substance in his hand. He was thrown into a bath of scalding water and held under water several times during the incident. The guard then came over to him with his hands lathered and proceeded to sexually assault him by grabbing his genitals and then putting his finger up his anus while asking, 'Why haven't you got a hard-on?'. The guard then attempted to masturbate the prisoner. Another guard said to his colleague, 'You haven't got the magic touch'. He recalled subsequently being threatened by a different guard: 'I'm actually here to break you, and, see, by the time I'm finished with you you'll not be able to have children'.

## MEDICAL CARE AND TREATMENT

From the evidence presented to the Panel it became clear that medical care of H-Block prisoners was consistently negligent, and regularly wilfully abusive. Examples of extreme forms of 'treatment' included a prisoner who had bleeding and strangulated haemorrhoids cut out without anaesthetic. He was given tablets, presumably pain-killers, but received no follow-up consultation.

For many prisoners, visiting the prison doctor was not an option. They were compelled to wear the prison trousers and had minimal confidence that their condition would be treated empathetically or appropriately. As stated above, they also risked beatings from prison guards:

*Well, my experience personally was one of, I mean, if you didn't need to or it wasn't immediate*



*or an emergency type nature, you didn't go near them because you knew that you were not going to get any medical attention from them. No medical attention whatsoever. It was a charade but what you did, by leaving your cell and going to speak to so-called medical people, was you exposed yourself to potential brutality. You knew that you were safe for the time being in your cell but when you had to leave your cell and go out to what was called 'the Circle', which wasn't a circle at all, because it was rectangular. It was more prison slang for this area which they controlled, and that's where the medical accommodation would have been, the MO's [Medical Officer] room as we would have called it. In order to go and see these people you knew you were going out into a potentially volatile area that left you in fear, more often than not ... It was always potentially threatening because that's where they were and that's where they controlled. That was their domain. It left you vulnerable.*

Prisoners had no trust in prison medical staff: *'the doctors did see us as prisoners first and foremost and patients afterwards'*. Rather than being independent, consistent with the Hippocratic Oath underpinning medical practice, prison doctors were identified as an important constituent element of an inhumane regime, the purpose of which was to 'break' - therefore harm - prisoners mentally and physically:

*If you wanted to see a doctor, you put your name down and you might not have got to see him for a week or two, especially if you had bruises and things. They wouldn't put your request in. In one case, I know a fella he had a broken nose during the forced washes and the doctor came around and he said, 'What about my nose?' The doctor said, 'I am not here for your nose, come around tomorrow and see me'.*

As stated previously, guards alleged 'lice infestation' in order to remove prisoners from their cells. Doctors and medical orderlies were implicated in this process:

*I remember that day we were asked to come out to the doctor and obviously, we refused ... So, they actually trailed us up to the doctor. It was a table ... at the top of the wing ... they banged our heads down and I just heard the doctor saying 'Lice'. And they took us back to the cell again and then my cellmate came back. And I said to him: 'Did you hear the doctor saying anything?' He says, 'Aye, lice'. I said, 'Well, we're going to get a forced wash'.*

Anticipation of forced washes compounded prisoners' suffering:

*And for about two weeks after it, they kept banging buckets, rattling buckets, because that was a sign that they were getting a forced wash. It was that type of stuff. It was all psychological torture to me, to be honest with you, and was all that hyped up.*

Despite the inhumane conditions, prisoners remained, *'relatively healthy ... I know it's unbelievable, you haven't washed your hair for three or four months, but we had no lice'*.

## PHYSICAL ASSAULTS, MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

Visiting the doctor due to the painful impact of cleaning agents on his throat and eyes, a former prisoner stated that the doctor sat at his desk without personal engagement or physical examination. The visit *'lasted about 15 seconds'*. Medical treatment was *'nothing remarkable, other than they let you stew in your own juices'*. The evidence presented to the Panel demonstrates former prisoners' lack of confidence in the medical staff. Together with the guards, they denied prisoners *'their rights and access to basic human conditions'*, and played a significant role in sustaining an *'environment of neglect which existed in the prison at the time'*. A request by a former prisoner for a medical appointment to assess and treat injuries - from his *'belly button right down to his knees'* - following a severe beating by guards, was ignored.

Former prisoners considered medical personnel to be unsympathetic: *'doctors would come round the wing to inspect prisoners accompanied by prison officers, and they had already written their notes before seeing the prisoner'*. Medical officers, prison guards with minimal medical training yet responsible for the health of prisoners, were a particular concern. A former prisoner recalled the adequacy of treatment given to a fellow prisoner who was suffering *'hallucinations'* as *'the doctor wasn't a doctor, he was a doctor in disguise, a screw'*. Further concerns were raised regarding doctors regularly agreeing to prisoners' fitness to receive punishments without carrying out medical checks. For example: *'how was the doctor able to sign that when the doctor didn't know me, didn't see me?'*

A former prisoner stated that on one occasion he was referred to the medical officer because his anus was bleeding following an assault by guards. The medical officer asked *'who had done this'*. The prisoner felt he could not answer because the perpetrators were standing behind him. They had threatened him that if they were named the assault would be repeated when

he returned to his cell. The medical officer told the prisoner that he would recover from his injuries, holding his cell-mate responsible for the assault. It was a clear example of collusion between prison medical staff and guards.

When a former prisoner complained about constant bruising, the doctor, nick-named by prisoners '*Mengele*', dismissed his concerns, stating it was '*just dirt*'. The prisoner challenged him and the doctor replied, '*I know. Look, it's regrettable ... What's happening in here it's terrible and it's regrettable, but I have to*'. In the presence of a Principal Officer, the doctor told the prisoner that he was suffering from malnutrition. The Principal Officer responded, '*We are not here to feed them, we are here to break them*'. This exchange happened in June 1978. On 30th June, a Northern Ireland Office memorandum stated that there was no concern regarding prisoners' healthcare as daily reports demonstrated that doctors interviewed prisoners 'without delay' when necessary.<sup>19</sup> Further, it noted that since the beginning of the protest there had been no indication of physical or mental illness, or malnutrition, as a consequence of prison conditions.

As prisoners' mental health deteriorated, they were interviewed and usually prescribed medication to '*relieve anxiety*'. Subsequent care was negligible, just an occasional '*sham doctor's meeting*' and increased medication prescribed without a full examination. A former prisoner suffering from toothache recalled requesting to see the doctor. He was told that unless he conformed to wearing clothes, thereby '*coming off the blanket*', he would be denied a medical consultation. He refused to comply and access was denied. Yet, on 16th November 1979 in a written answer to a parliamentary question, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland stated that prisoners '*have access to medical facilities equivalent to those available to the general population ... medical care is never denied a prisoner on disciplinary grounds*'.<sup>20</sup>

In an earlier document, dated 26th January 1978, the Deputy Chief Medical Officer of the Northern Ireland Prison Service noted that prison doctors had maintained normal doctor-patient relationships and '*there is no evidence that the physical or mental condition of any of the protestors is deteriorating as a result of their self-imposed routine*'.<sup>21</sup> However, those who participated in the Blanket Protest contradicted this statement. A former prisoner considered there

was a '*high level of collusion between the doctors and the prison officers ... which meant that doctors would turn a blind eye to the physical abuse which was being suffered at that time*'. As stated earlier, such collusion included medical staff ordering forced washes for lice treatment without physically examining prisoners. A former prisoner recalled a doctor looking in his cell and, without examination, stating, '*Oh he's full of them*'. On another occasion, guards instructed him to see the doctor. He refused and was carried from his cell on guards' shoulders, banging his head on the grilles as they carried him. At the doctor's office:

*They dropped me from shoulder height and he never looked up, he was just writing away and he said, 'De-lice him' ... You were a non-entity. They looked through you as if you were dirt.*

The forced wash was brutal:

*That consisted of you being put into a bath that had a wooden scrubbing brush and the prison officer said, 'Do you want to scrub your bollocks?' I never answered him so he scrubbed it and he half-shaved round my pubic hairs and after that you walked through the grille and there was a prison officer with a white coat who painted some sort of cream all over me and then I was kept on my own for about three weeks. Going to Mass, they would ring the bell and say, 'Unclean'.*

Medical officers and the doctor created a '*charade parade of medical examinations, carried out to give them a pretext*' for the violence of forced washes. Prisoners had no trust nor faith in the medical staff because '*they had no interest in treating the prisoners*'.

There was no differentiation between medical officers and guards:

*I don't know if they really were medical or screws dressed up because all they would do was grab you. If they wanted to search you, they would put you over the table ... they were simply one and the same.*

A former prisoner recalled a doctor, whom he named, examining a prisoner from '*a distance*', then telling a guard he had lice, '*ensuring that he would have to suffer a forced wash and an accompanying beating*'. Thus '*prisoners had no faith in the doctor's ability to be objective in the provision of treatment*'.

<sup>19</sup> Kew Gardens Materials/ Files, NIO Memorandum, Maze Protest – International Red Cross Interest, J. E. Hannigan, 30 June 1978

<sup>20</sup> Written Answers, Northern Ireland: Prisoners (Medical Care) Hansard, 16 November 1979

<sup>21</sup> Kew Gardens Materials/ Files, CJ4/2213 Prisoners protesting because they have not been granted Special Category Status, Report No 3. J. P. Irvine, 26 January 1978

They *'would sooner have lain in their cell with multiple injuries rather than, literally rather than, go to the doctor'*.

Doctors *'played a role'* in the abuse, *'many of them there to simply rubber-stamp what the prison officers had told them'*. The negative relationship between guards and prisoners was mirrored by that between *'inmates and the medical profession'* because doctors were seen as *'part of the organisation which allowed this abuse to flourish'*. A former prisoner stated that he decided against reporting the beatings he endured because he considered there was collusion between the medical officers, the doctors and the guards. Naming two guards *'who done the beatings'* another prisoner commented: *'but they were just wee men in uniform, who thought they had power ... the doctors knew this was happening'*. Medical personnel and governors could not have been unaware of the abuses committed by the guards.

Clarifying to the Panel the process and conduct of forced washes, a former prisoner stated they were administered by guards under the direction of the doctor. When he was subjected to a forced wash, two medical officers attended and watched him being *'brutalised, fired into a bath, getting hit with deck scrubbers'*. Another prisoner stated there *'was always doctors and medics about'* and it would have been impossible for them not to hear and witness the brutalisation that prisoners endured.

Under prison rules, prisoners on disciplinary or punishment regimes, regardless of hygiene conditions within the cell, should have been visited daily by the prison's medical officer. At a meeting on 19th September, Dr McKeown, from the DHSS, stated that *'doctors did not insist the prisoners must be clean all over, although they were very likely to want the relevant part of the anatomy clean before examination'*.<sup>22</sup> Dr Sloan, also from the DHSS, replied, *'visiting doctors would probably be more loathe to examine dirty patients'*.

All former prisoners gave extensive testimonies regarding the abuse suffered at the hands of medical staff and guards. The dehumanisation central to this abuse is well illustrated by a table search suffered by a prisoner in 1978. He was told *'you're going to enjoy this'*. His legs held apart, a guard carried out a cavity search. One of the guards holding his leg said: *'You love it really, you Fenian bastard. You do. You love it. Say you love it, you Provo*

*fucker. Come on. You love it'*. The prisoner replied, *'I'll never give in, ever'*. He was left on the table crying while the guards laughed. Naked, his towel and rosary beads were thrown down the wing. He reflected: *'Something died in me that day'*. His experience echoes the comment of a fellow prisoner who stated that medical officers and doctors were *'complicit in the abuse that was central to the prison regime strategy to break the prisoners'*.

In a document dated 4th October 1979, the British Government acknowledged *'various criticisms'* levelled against medical care in the H-Blocks. It stated: *'Most but not all' concerns emanating from a 'wide range of sources' throughout the North related to protesting prisoners.*<sup>23</sup> Further, profound concerns were raised by Edward P Morgan, Chairman of the USA Human Rights Committee, who questioned the adequacy of medical care and treatment available to prisoners. He had received information that prisoners received *'either inadequate medical attention or no medical attention at all'*.

## TOXIC CLEANING AGENTS

The UK Government rejected the Independent Panel's Freedom of Information requests regarding the use of toxic cleaning agents, stating that such information had not been retained. Toxic cleaning agents were used consistently, resulting in permanent damage to prisoners' health. The following statement encapsulates their experiences:

*What I mean by cleaning the cells, they didn't actually come in and clean the cells they just used to sweep in the heavy disinfectant. They had a big squeegee and they squeezed it in and we would have been pushing it back out onto the landing ... every night under your door ... that didn't work for them because everything was coming back out, urine, faeces, the whole lot. So that was all in the landing when they came back the next morning ... then they decided, 'Right were going to clean the cells' and they introduced the steam hoses, power hoses, hot power hoses. They were all suited up in those Hazmat suits - that was the introduction of the wing shifts.*

Cells were cleaned nightly until wing shifts were introduced, during which prisoners were removed from their cells. Cells were then cleaned weekly using an undiluted agent, stinging prisoners' eyes and inhibiting breathing. They stated that inhalation

<sup>22</sup> Kew Gardens Materials/ Files, CJ4/3024 The Medical Role in Prisons, with Particular Reference to the Dirty Protest, Note of a Meeting, Stormont Castle, David Brooker, 19 September 1979

<sup>23</sup> Kew Gardens Materials/ Files, CJ4/3024 The Medical Role in Prisons, with Particular Reference to the Dirty Protest, Submission, E. N. Barry, 4 October 1979



of the fumes hurt like CS gas, causing severe irritation to their eyes and throats. A former prisoner commented that occasionally guards entered cells and sprayed chemicals - choking him, burning his eyes and contaminating his food. The burning sensation and impact on breathing continued throughout the night and into the following day until, eventually, the fumes subsided. Cell cleaning was not carried out by contractors but by guards. Ventilation was poor and prisoners broke the windows to their cells in attempts to breathe unpolluted air. Iron grilles were then installed over the windows.

A former prisoner recalled the lung and eye pain when *'noxious cleaning agents were released onto the wing ... and disinfectant was thrown at prisoners, as well as being hosed into the cells'*. Undiluted chemicals, an *'intolerable amount'*, were poured under cell doors. Another prisoner stated:

*I didn't go to Mass that Sunday morning because I only went to Mass whenever I was meeting some of my friends from the local area. But that Sunday morning I didn't go and the next thing there was like a blue liquid that cut the eyes and breath completely out of me. And even when the ones come back from Mass, the eyes were burned clean out of them, you know, red, and water running out of you.*

Former prisoners alleged that pure ammonia was used with *'horrendous'* consequences. The toxicity of the cleaning agents, especially undiluted, was intense: *'it would strip the black paint from the floor'*. Returned to cells that were still wet from cleaning, prisoners suffered extreme breathing difficulties and chest infections they attributed to the chemicals. On corridors, guards mixed urine with chemicals, sweeping it under doors and into cells. The fumes were *'sickening and burned your throat'*. At night prisoners had difficulty breathing, it was *'as if someone was standing on your chest'*.

A former prisoner stated that on one occasion, after Sunday Mass, he returned to his cell to discover that *'a large amount of undiluted seemingly toxic substance'* had been poured into his cell. *'He smashed the cell window for air, 'It reminded me a wee bit of pure ammonia, like pre ammonia, you know what I mean?'* Another former prisoner's existing illness was compounded by chemicals poured into his cell, resulting in his eyes burning and severe difficulty in breathing. One night, unusual because cleaning was carried out during the day, night staff were drunk and poured chemicals under cell doors. The prisoners shouted, *'Can't breathe! Can't breathe!'* The prisoners' CO (Commanding Officer) shouted, *'Smash them, break the windows!'* This provided some respite from the poisoned air.

Given that a significant number of scientific studies link cancer and other serious medical conditions to powerful disinfectants and cleaning products, a humanitarian response is necessary to ensure appropriate medical testing is carried out for all former prisoners who have health concerns that could be linked to their exposure in prison to these products. The Government's response that information on the products used has not been retained fails to address the issue of responsibility for illnesses that former prisoners consider are connected to the conditions imposed by the prison regime.

## SURVIVAL

In the context of an inhumane regime devised to break the will of prisoners determined to secure political status, the combination of their physical deterioration and psychological suffering is impossible to quantify. Throughout the Protest they developed strategies to maintain contact with their fellow prisoners and sustain a collective morale:

*Well, first of all, we had a communication system where we could shout between Blocks. It would have been mostly H5 and H4 at the time. We would have exchanged pieces of news at the time, what was happening and what the screws were doing to us at that time. And just asking how people were. Sometimes, you would have got news from the visits about how things were in the other Blocks but H5 never seemed as bad.*

They were aware that the resistance and resilience underpinning their protests was beyond the comprehension of prison governors and guards:

*So, we used to say to those guys, those perpetrators who were trying to break us - 'It's like for them chewing on a brick because all they're going to do is break all their teeth because we are not giving in. We are not being classified as criminals. We are soldiers. We are political prisoners.' And they couldn't understand that. So, they couldn't understand the concept of the issue of these human beings which they had at their disposal.*

By living *'one day at a time'* most prisoners survived the stress of the protest, the violence of guards and the impact on families:

*So, they had me on the ground. It was the prison officers. They were absolutely determined to break us, and we were absolutely determined not to be broken. So, every morning you were going up and you were just saying, 'Well, today I say no!'*

Many prisoners described persistent chronic mental health problems, the most common being Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The intensity and

cruelty of their incarceration, illustrated in their evidence to the Panel as a combination of violent physical assault, inhuman and degrading treatment and persistent psychological abuse, had short-term impact but long-term debilitation:

*Yes. I'm currently for about a year now suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress. Probably longer but I had to go to a Medical Board recently and they were able to trace it right back to thirty years ago when I also went through mental issues coming from the blanket protest - flashbacks. So, there is a paper trail that has been left.*

Depression accompanied by alcohol dependency debilitated former prisoners' lives, contributing to premature death:

*I didn't know anything about PTSD when the first attack happened. It was just after the last hunger striker died. I was in a canteen one time and I just took this fit of shaking and I was carrying a tray and I started shaking like that. My legs started shaking, everything started shaking, and I just threw the tray down ran out and ran into a pub. I had to sup a pint and a glass of whiskey. I knew nothing about PTSD and drink is the quickest thing ... There are blanket-men out there who are drinking themselves to death ... self-medicating and it's PTSD ... And they are dying premature deaths because of it.*

In preparing to give evidence to the Panel another former prisoner experienced symptoms associated with PTSD and discussed the disorientation that has become part of his life:

*Undoubtedly, if I was evaluated by some psychologist or psychiatrist, I would be assessed as PTSD. My behaviour, like, when I travel from Dundalk to here. I would be very wary, I don't travel with a mobile phone, I don't use the phone much. If I am coming up to see my mother, I would say I'm coming up on Sunday, but I will come up on Thursday. Things like that. I think general behaviour for me would say that it's very, very difficult to escape that type of trauma and brutality and just say, 'It happened'.*

## **ADJUDICATIONS: PUNISHMENT FOR REFUSAL TO WEAR UNIFORM**

### **Cellular confinement**

For those who have not experienced cellular confinement in jail or a secure hospital, it is not possible to understand fully the profound impact it has on those detained. Former prisoners testified that they endured twenty-four hours a day in these

conditions without exercise because they refused to accept criminal status and, therefore, rejected prison-issue uniforms. They were allowed one visit each month:

*People weren't taking visits, there was no communication at all, so you were basically locked in your cell for months on end. Some prisoners didn't take visits for years because they had to wear the prison garb.*

Communication with other prisoners was restricted to attending Mass. The prisoners knew the outside world was oblivious to the conditions they were enduring inside the H-Blocks. Monthly visits were restricted to thirty minutes. During the first two years spent alone in his cell, a former prisoner recalled he 'almost lost his mind'. Others testified that cellular confinement has had a significant long-term psychological effect on their lives and associations. A former prisoner stated that while he copes with daily life, the experience is rarely far from his thoughts.

At visits, guards stood close to prisoners and families, terminating the visit if the conversation did not meet with their approval. A former prisoner stated that he accepted just six visits in four years because of the threat of assaults from guards. Following his refusal to stand on a mat, another prisoner was put in solitary confinement for two weeks. Brought before the Governor, he denied a guard's fabricated allegation that he had been verbally abusive yet lost three days remission. While in solitary, threatened with a beating, he claimed that he was ordered by a guard to clean the floor with a toothbrush.

A former prisoner recalled sixteen months in solitary confinement at Crumlin Road Jail as punishment for protesting. When he was transferred to the H-Blocks he continued on the Blanket Protest. While suffering minimal physical violence in Crumlin Road, on many occasions he was forced to leave his cell naked. Recounting how he talked to himself, pacing his cell in a trance, he considered solitary confinement has had a lasting impact; over time the psychological 'torture' he suffered through 'unrelenting' isolation has had a greater impact than physical abuse.

### **Denial of exercise**

In their evidence, former prisoners stated that mental debilitation was compounded by deprivation of physical exercise. Initially, a Governor agreed that prisoners could leave their cells for exercise wearing their own clothes. The Northern Ireland Office, however, refused permission and the Governor stated: 'You wear our PE gear or nothing'. Although exercise yards adjacent to the Blocks were relatively

small and screened, they at least offered sunlight, fresh air and sufficient space to exercise. Denial of access to outdoor exercise became another element in the regime's objective to break the Protest.

### **'The Boards'**

*When I was in solitary confinement, it was down in the boards, as we called it. Your accommodation was basically a bare cell and it had a hardboard bed in it, so we referred to it as the 'Boards' and that's where you were subjected to the Number One diet, which was bread and water.*

A former prisoner recalled being caught with a biro refill hidden in his anus. Subjected to a mirror search he was slapped continuously by a guard who had seen 'something up there'. Taken to the medical officer he was forced over a table for an internal search. The medical officer confirmed the guard's opinion and the prisoner was moved to a cell. A Principal Officer 'came in and said that if I didn't take out the biro refill, they would take it down'. He was taken to the Boards where he received a 'massive beating in front of the MO [medical officer] by four officers from the boards'. Suspended upside down, a guard shouted, 'Get the pliers!' A guard returned with 'long-nosed pliers', inserting them into the prisoner's anus, cutting him internally. They were household pliers, not surgical. Unable to bear the extreme physical pain and psychological degradation the prisoner shouted, 'Alright! Alright!' He removed the refill and he was thrown to the floor.

Typically, prisoners were sent to the punishment block for arbitrary reasons and minor infractions such as talking to another prisoner. In solitary confinement they were put on the 'Number One diet' – tea without milk, watered down soup and dried, stale bread. A prisoner recalled being beaten unconscious in the back of a van en route to the punishment block. On Christmas Day, guards, under the influence of drink, gave him a further beating in his cell. A visiting priest saw his physical condition and reported his concerns to the Governor. No action was taken. Prisoners did not complain to the Governor about beatings, because 'you were automatically charged with false allegations and you were moved to the Boards where you were more in isolation and more at their mercy'.

### **Loss of remission**

On 15th January 1978, a letter from the Northern Ireland Office confirmed that in total 230 prisoners would lose 114 years of remission. Four prisoners on the Blanket Protest already had passed the dates on which they would have been released had it not

been for their protest. A further letter stated: 'There is no evidence that the repeated awards of loss of remission have any effects on the attitudes of the prisoners ... something should be done to put more pressure on the protestors to abandon their protest'.

Each time Governors visited the cells to adjudicate on the charges relating to the breach of Prison Rules – not wearing prison uniform and not doing prison work – prisoners lost a further two weeks remission. No documentation was provided to prisoners or their lawyers regarding Governors' adjudications, thereby preventing grounds for appeal. A former prisoner recalled a Governor arriving at his cell door at two-week intervals simply to inform him that a further two weeks remission had been lost. He stated: 'I lost 20 months of remission ... They used to 'award' us [lost remission time] as if it was a treat ... 'We are rewarding you with loss of remission'.'

Asked by the Governor if he was prepared to work and follow the normal regime, another prisoner swore at the Governor who replied, 'So that's alright, two weeks loss of remission'. A prisoner who would have been due for release in 1982, but due to loss of remission served a further three years, remembered the Governor reading a statement which was neither given to him nor to his lawyer. Other former prisoners informed the Panel that they had lost several years' remission, some serving their full sentence.

## **LOYALIST PRISONERS**

While Loyalist prisoners were outside the Panel's remit, it is important to note that their experiences within the H-Blocks also could be harsh, leading to conflict with the prison authorities. Small in number, during the early days of the Protest a group of Loyalists joined but were ordered to cease by the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). References were made to this sequence of events by two Republican former prisoners:

*I have to be truthful. The Loyalists didn't last too long. I don't know if the word came from their own organisation that they were getting too friendly [with Republicans] and things. I don't know. It could have been. I have to give him credit [Name], who was next door to me. He was a tough cookie, he was one of us, kind of thing, we were all together. That's the way he looked at it.*

*I was from the Oldpark Road and there was a lot of Loyalists from the Oldpark Road and they knew who I was. So, when I was walking down a wing there's screams and shouts and someone spat at me. So, we were on that wing for a couple*



*of days ... The Loyalists were also on the Blanket Protest ... But after about three days the Loyalists decided to give up their protest. So the screws came down and shifted us into H4.*

The apparent show of solidarity between some Loyalist and Republican prisoners created friction within Loyalist organisations:

*When I went on the protest there was about ten men on the protest and three of them were Loyalists. Two UVF, one UDA, and six Provisionals and the blanket was like the First World War. Nobody expected it to last longer than that Christmas. And that was part of the reason we all went on it because we really did think it wasn't going to last. That Christmas came and the Loyalists got word from outside. This is what they told us when they were leaving. They got word from outside from their political hierarchy that they cannot be seen to be on the same protest as Republican prisoners, so they left the protest the next day, Boxing Day.*

## FOOD AS PUNISHMENT

### 'Number One' Diet

In terms of quality, variety, nutrition and preparation, food consistently is a contentious issue in prisons. Historically, its withdrawal or restriction have been used directly to punish prisoners who refuse to comply with regimes and their disciplinary codes. In Crumlin Road Jail the Number One Diet was punitive:

*[It] consisted of a couple of rounds of dry bread in the morning, a small ladle of soup at lunchtime and a couple of rounds of dry bread at night. You done that for three days over the period. Obviously, that physically was having an impact on you. I think by the time I left the Crum I was seven and a half stone or less. Although I wasn't that heavy at the time. The Number One Diet was obviously a punishment to try and force you off the protest.*

Initially, its use was arbitrary:

*... whether you got it or not depended on who the screw was at that particular time and his behaviour. You might have had it handed to you or just threw at you.*

In May 1978, Amnesty International wrote to Roy Mason, the Labour Government's hard-line Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, raising concerns

regarding the Number One Diet.<sup>24</sup> The letter stated that should allegations regarding deprivation of exercise, withdrawal of access to reading materials, refusal to allow 'slopping out', removal of bedding during the day, and the imposition of a 'restricted diet', be confirmed, it would amount to 'cruel inhuman and degrading treatment'. The letter had no impact on Labour Government policy.

In evidence to the Panel a former Governor stated:

*The Number One Diet is basically a Punishment Block diet ... I would be in no doubt it wasn't adequate for a human being to exist on for a day ... the Number One Diet, yeah, I would have no doubt that that was applied often ... and the beatings, yeah ... I have no doubt people would have been abused, prisoners may have been abused in the system, young prisoners or female prisoners ... the level of searching and anal searching, all of that, was horrific.*

### Quantity and quality of food

*There was food there sometimes for two days and the maggots was flying out of it. It wasn't half cooked ... swarms of bluebottles ... I was about twelve stone when I went in and about eight stone when I came out.*

Weight loss was a common theme in former prisoners' statements, the weight of some becoming 'dangerously low'. Food was used to break the will of prisoners and they recalled deterioration in the quality of food as the protest escalated. It also varied between the Blocks - 'sometimes you'd eat it, sometimes you couldn't eat it'. A former prisoner stated that much of the food was purposefully inedible, leaving them permanently hungry:

*For example, your cornmeal. You were meant to get milk in it, but it was watered milk, it was never pure milk. If you got porridge, there was two slices of bread sat on top of the porridge with the margarine and the spoon stuck in the bread and the porridge. Supper time, you would have got a jam bun and the jam was put in your hand ... I would have had diarrhoea a lot of times when I look back at it ... the food was rotten but you had to eat it.*

Thus food was part of the prison 'regime strategy' to break prisoners' resolve by 'making prison conditions so unbearable that prisoners would leave the protest'. Another former prisoner stated it 'was used as a form of discipline against prisoners as it

<sup>24</sup> Kew Gardens, Materials/ Files, CJ4/2207, Letter from Dick Oosting, Deputy Secretary General, Amnesty International, to Rt Hon Roy Mason, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, 23 May 1978



*was controlled so that they just got enough to stay alive ... food would often be put inside the cell door beside maggots'. Never receiving full rations, prisoners 'would always be kept hungry'. Guards deliberately threw food on the cell floor, sometimes kicking it to the prisoners: 'You couldn't eat half the food. Half the food was rotten'.*

Guards manipulated the distribution of food, attempting to cause friction between cell-mates. Encouraging prisoners to argue over their meagre portions, in cells accommodating two prisoners one plate would have a full portion, the other much less. Prisoners, however, simply shared what they were given. Much of the time it was 'half-rationed', served by orderlies who 'were UDA and UVF members'. Another prisoner recalled guards eating or tampering with prisoners' food - and a morning when a prisoner shouted: *'I got eleven cornflakes this morning'*. During the protest, he lost four stones as prisoners were starved at guards' discretion. Two guards were heard arguing by another prisoner because one of them had put fly-killer in the food. For over a month following the killing of Lord Mountbatten food was *'rationed down bigtime'* - a bun and half a mug of tea. If not thrown at the prisoners, it was delivered with a hateful greeting: *'Here's a Mountbatten special for you'*.

### **Food contamination**

From the evidence presented to the Panel, the contamination of food and water was institutionalised, purposeful and used as another instrument of degradation to break the Blanket Protestors' resilience. What follows is taken from the statements of four former prisoners:

*I can recall two occasions in particular between 1978 and 1979 where I actually drank tea that had been urinated in. It was only when I started drinking it that I realized ... that was attributed more to those who prepared the food. They were criminal prisoners brought in to provide that service for the screws ... most of them came from Loyalist backgrounds so there was an axe to grind, there was hatred ... They weren't concerned for our welfare or our health. They were more concerned about making it as bad as they possibly could. It was like payback, if you understand what I mean. They urinated in the tea, tampered with the food. They did, yes.*

*The tea sometimes you knew that it was tampered with ... Where I knew that there was like urine it, was in the custard that, you know, you got with the pudding that the urine was. And the maggots, yes, were in the dinner, like.*

*There was one particular prison officer and whenever he was giving you your dinner, he used to rev his throat and he used to spit, you know, as he handed your dinner in to you.*

*You had a plastic container that was used for your water, but it was washed out with disinfectant and the whole time I was on the blanket I never once drank it because you could smell the disinfectant.*

In addition to phlegm and urine, guards also contaminated prisoners' food with maggots:

*Some of the dinners you just couldn't eat. There were some dinners that I just couldn't eat, it was that bad, like. So, you would have just threw it in the cell. And that creates maggots. So, they used to put the maggots into our food as well.*

*I remember they sent us in the pies and the word was sent down - we used to shout down to one another through the pipes - that they check their pies, that there were maggots in it. So, they'd had maggots in their pies.*

Asked at the Panel if he was aware of deliberate food contamination at the time, a former Governor replied:

*I'm aware that most of that was done. A lot of it really took on big proportions when the dirty protest started. And it would be impossible to exaggerate the conditions under the dirty protest for prisoners, for prison staff ... I have no doubt that staff would have been spitting on food, peeing on food, spraying it with fly spray, you know.*

A former prisoner stated that food was *'constantly tampered with'*, including urine in the tea. Food tampering was used as a *'weapon'*. Depending on the guards on duty, portions were reduced. Hunger left prisoners with no choice but to eat what they were given. Guards *'took delight in informing the prisoners that their food had been tampered with'*; spittle, urine, disinfectant, maggots. Another prisoner stated: *'The culture of the prison regime at that time allowed for the prison staff to soil food by applying foreign bodies to it as well as urine etc.'* One interviewee recalled a priest observing guards *'urinating in the tea urn'*.

Realising his food was being deliberately contaminated, a prisoner refused to eat. Transferred to the prison hospital he was given injections to supplement his meals. Once he had regained weight, he was returned to his cell and rejoined the Protest. Again, he discovered maggots, bluebottles and disinfectant in his food and stopped eating. Recently, by chance, he met a former guard who denied awareness of the extent of food contamination: *'He*

was horrified at the brutality, but then said, '[Name], there was an awful lot of other stuff they did on you that you don't know about'. Asked what he meant, the former guard replied: 'The food' - the orderlies were 'Loyalist prisoners so they had an axe to grind as well, so they all tampered with your food'. This included putting excess salt and maggots in pies. The following statements revealed the tension between consuming contaminated food and the desperation of hunger:

*We used to get soup, I always thought it was tampered with. I don't know what sort of soup it was supposed to be, nobody ever took it ... There was times you weren't fit to eat it ... water came in a gallon jar and it wasn't good, like stale water.*

*I suppose at times you were so hungry you just wolfed it into you ... And when we were receiving our food, you had to go to the door to get it handed in and it would have went flying past you depending who was on and depending what was happening on the outside as well. You always knew the news by the reaction of the screws.*

Prisoners were so hungry, especially at night, they hid pieces of stale bread in their cells. If guards discovered food during cell searches they trampled it into the ground.

## VISITS, LEGAL CONSULTATIONS, BOARD OF VISITORS

### Family visits

Visits, particularly from families, are central to the lives and well-being of prisoners in any situation. Inevitably tense and difficult in normal circumstances, in conditions of maximum security and political conflict family visits are conducted in a climate of deep suspicion and profound hostility. While in the H-Blocks, and since, many prisoners kept from their loved ones the reality of the brutality to which they were subjected. As the following two accounts show, their silent suffering has had long-term consequences:

*I have received eight years of therapy for it, for what I am saying now. I couldn't say all this out at the start. It took me eighteen years to be even able to tell my son about it, my family, my wife, everybody. I couldn't talk about it. I had to go to therapy ... and it's helped me a lot. But I'm very nervous.*

*You see I have never talked about it before. My children were 16 and 17 before they knew I was in jail. I have never talked about it to anybody before. The reason I don't talk about it to anybody*

*is because I don't know, if I start talking about it, I can get back to where I am. Because it took me a long while to get here and get that sort of balance in myself. So, I don't want to react like I did way back.*

In addition to beatings endured before and after visits, the personal anguish of seeing close family for thirty minutes a month was painful:

*Mother and father would come up. Like, I hadn't seen them in a month, so my hair started growing ... Over a period of time ... my appearance would have changed. And I knew it was having an effect on my mother. My mother didn't like to see me coming out like that. So, I think it affected my mother more than my father. She felt it. Every time she come up, she was always nervous. She didn't know if I was in good health or I was beaten or, I mean, anything like that, like.*

When members of prisoners' families died there was no compassion shown by guards who appeared to take pleasure in casually informing prisoners of the death of a loved one. It offered another opportunity to inflict psychological pain:

*I was trailed from the wing and taken to the PO's office, the officer in charge of the Block at the time, and I was thrown onto the floor. And he just turned around and said to me: 'We got word last night that your father had died. Take him back to the cell'. So, they just trailed me out and threw me back into the cell. I hadn't a clue if he was telling me the truth or he was making it up ... My mother died six months later, yeah. I made a request and was told to go out and see the Governor ... I made a request for to attend the funeral and they came back within two days and they said to me if I put the prison uniform on and leave the protest that they would consider, you know, letting me out for the funeral. And I said I wasn't prepared to leave the protest and to go to prison work and to go to a prison wing where they're doing work. And he said: 'Well, therefore your request is refused'.*

In their testimonies, former prisoners acknowledged the extreme suffering endured within families, by parents and grandparents, siblings and children.

*We were Irish Republicans; we were put in jail. There was no duty of care for us or our families. Restricted to one visit a month. And six months would have gone past when you didn't have a visit because something would have happened, and the visit was cancelled ... The trauma my family went through was probably far worse than mine because they didn't know what was happening and rumours were rife.*

Visits were an opportunity for family and prisoners to exchange information, but also to bring material into and from the prison. Asked at the Panel if he believed he was treated severely because he accepted visits, a former prisoner replied:

*Yeah, because they just didn't want people to go out and start getting information about what was happening in the Blocks ... there was a few of us who were on appeal and were going out to make the visits. I think by using this treatment they were trying to put fear into you to stop them.*

Restricted to thirty minutes each month, in the context of assaults on prisoners by guards before and after visits and of open hostility and searches directed against prisoners' families, the short visits were traumatic:

*You certainly didn't look forward to the visits. But the visits were essential for families and many of the prisoners were married. But also to get our wee bits and pieces in and out of the jail. They were essential for our survival. It wasn't something that you looked forward to. If you had a visit you wanted to know who was on your wing that day to gauge what level of harassment you were going to receive.*

Prisoners stated they paid a heavy price, physically and emotionally, to attend visits:

*You were torn between the devil and the deep blue sea. If you didn't take your visit your family worried about you, and if you did take it you were running the risk of physical and verbal abuse on the way round because you were escorted ... there was very little you could say on a visit because a screw heard every word that you said ... It was a necessary evil ... to assure my family that I was ok.*

Visits gave the authorities the opportunity to compel prisoners to wear the prison uniform and to administer severe beatings under the pretext of security inspections:

*I never took a visit for four years, then took my first visit, I didn't even smoke at the time. After the visit they got me, they took me to some place in the prison I didn't even know existed and they stripped me naked and they told me to bend over and they got me into like a wheelbarrow. They checked my buttocks out and they checked everything. I had nothing, I wasn't trying to smuggle anything. Then they stuck their dirty fingers in my mouth to check if anything was in my mouth.*

A former prisoner recalled physical abuse being 'simply a matter of routine'. Prior to visits, prisoners

were forced to squat over a mirror while '*prison officers would rain punches down*'. On one occasion, a guard said, '*you're in sociology today ... whilst banging my head with a large black book*', which the prisoner assumed was a textbook. It caused an injury that '*lasted for years*', requiring an operation on his release. Dehumanising searches on prisoners prior to family visits were extended to families, who were regularly verbally insulted during the searches. A mother was told: '*Your son is on Largactil, that's the beginning of the end of him*'.

A former prisoner stated that at the start of the hunger strike he took his monthly half-hour visits, enduring physical abuse from guards while forced to comply with mirror searches. He claimed that a member of the UVF witnessed the abuse and offered to testify against the guards. The case did not progress because he continued to refuse the prison uniform and was prevented from meeting his solicitor. Another former prisoner commented, '*you were sticking your neck out just to get a visit*'. Prisoners were a '*bag of nerves coming up to a visit, because of all the abuse you would have*'.

Sharing thirty minutes with loved ones each month was eagerly anticipated yet '*dreaded*' because of the inevitability of physical assaults '*by a gang of prison officers*'. Following the humiliation of mirror searches, prisoners tried to compose themselves for a thirty-minute supervised meeting with wives, relatives and children knowing that they would be subjected to further attacks and intrusive searches after the visit. Guards monitored conversations and intimidated prisoners deliberately to create a hostile atmosphere within which tensions were often unbearable for prisoners and families.

Coercion and brutality directed towards prisoners, together with the degradation imposed on families, compromised their right to visits. A former prisoner who was on appeal was entitled to receive daily visits from his family:

*And every day I had to go out ... over the mirror, bend, you got beaten down. Then you went out on the visit. While you were at the appeal visit you were supposed to discuss with your family your case and what you wanted. The prison officer stood right beside you and listened to every word you said, so you couldn't get talking, you know, about your appeal ...*

In evidence to the Panel another former prisoner stated:

*My mother's eighty-seven and she's of very sound mind. And I told her I was coming here today and she says she wished she could come with me to speak of the harassment and the trouble that she*



*went through ... searches and stuff coming into the prison and the abuse that she received from women, people who were searching them ...*

Visits gave guards the opportunity and authority to impose prison uniforms on prisoners, and Cell 26 was the room where guards inflicted severe punishment as prisoners were moved to and from visits:

*Oh yes, that was the only time in a month you put the uniform on and went out on a visit ... The prison staff tried continually to get you to use what they called your prison number, which we refused to recognise. Rather than use a name they would say, 'Number such and such' and then they would ask you the number and when you refused to recognise it you were slapped and punched about for refusing to use a prison number. Then, after the visit, you were brought back and you were taken to what was called 'Cell 26'. It was a big cell and that was where all the uniforms were kept. That's where you took the uniforms off and went through a search and during the search you were usually beaten.*

*Cell 26 was where, if you were going on a visit, you went up there. You took your towel off and you put on the uniform to go out to the visit, and that's where they had the mirror.*

## Legal consultations

Consultations with lawyers were essential to the progress of prisoners' cases, yet *'abuse was simply a matter of routine, but was particularly bad after legal visits'*. Former prisoners stated that prison authorities and guards were *'paranoid'* about legal consultations and the exchange of information between lawyers and their clients. This exacerbated physical attacks, *'meted out'* when prisoners returned to their cells from legal visits. Guards were aware that prisoners' lawyers were being informed about the physical abuse and appalling conditions endured daily by prisoners. Consequently, regular legal visits escalated the frequency of beatings.

A former prisoner appealing his conviction received multiple legal visits over a six-month period. Each visit was accompanied by physical abuse, ranging from *'very severe to a few kicks and punches'*. Escorted to meet his lawyer, the guards tormented him with threats of beatings after the visit. Throughout the meeting, while attempting to discuss his case, he anticipated the violence awaiting him. Another prisoner who had accepted monthly visits stated he was *'slapped and punched'* because he refused to answer to his prison number when called out by the

guards. Following each visit, he was taken to *'Cell 26'* where he was body-searched and beaten.

Regarding external oversight of the prison, a UK Government document, dated 7th December 1979, considered requests from international bodies and journalists for prison access to observe and report on the regime and its operation. The document weighed the benefits that might result from challenging what it identified as Republican propaganda against boosting prisoners' morale, thus undermining the regime. It stated that communication between the International Committee of the Red Cross and the UK Government could not be acknowledged because it would risk Republican prisoners achieving *'propaganda aims'*.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, International observers and journalists, in their professional roles, were prohibited from visiting prisoners. They could visit as a relative or friend but would be compelled to sign a confidentiality agreement that information obtained during visits would be neither published nor broadcast.

## Board of Visitors

With visiting restrictions on families, media representatives and human rights organisations, prisoners felt isolated. Thus fair and unbiased oversight and appraisal of conditions in which they lived was absent. The Prison's *'independent'* Board of Visitors regularly entered the H-Blocks. Its members were considered by prisoners to be *'another arm of the prison authorities'*, appointed to *'rubber stamp'* the regime's operational policies and practices and only concerned to ensure that *'prisoners had a Bible in their cell'*:

*You never seen the Board of Governors [Visitors] and to be quite frank with you, even if you did see them, they were just part of the system. If they had been in the wings, obviously they could have seen the conditions and they knew what was going on.*

Two former prisoners recalled their contact with members of the Board of Visitors:

*During that period of the protest, anybody who was on it [the Board] wasn't going to be very sympathetic to what we were at. And, yeah, to me it was just another arm of the prison authorities, you know, that rubber-stamps them.*

*There was a doctor at one time, I think, from round about Lurgan, who may have come out with something ... But that's the only exception I can remember. So, yeah, they were around regularly*

<sup>25</sup> Kew Gardens, Materials/ Files, CJ4/ 3024, Visits to Prisons in Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Office, 7 December 1979

*but ... the doors were open, and they'd look in and walk on again ... there was no engagement with them, no.*

Asked if he agreed with ex-prisoners' statements regarding the ineffectiveness of the Board of Visitors and, if so, whether that was the intention of the policy or that Board members did not want to appear critical of the regime's operation, a former Governor stated:

*It was probably who was chosen to do it. There was probably some well-meaning people who came in. But they started with the Governor and a cup of tea and they finished with the Governor and a cup of tea and they did the business to get their expenses, to get whatever they were getting. Whether it was ordinary prisoners or special*

*category prisoners ... no member of the Board of Visitors ever came to me and gave off about anything. It was useless and toothless.*

The control exerted by the Northern Ireland Office is clearly evident in the Northern Ireland Office document referred to earlier, written by J. P. Irvine, dated 26th January 1978, under a sub-section entitled 'Attitude of the Board of Visitors':

*We have had problems with two members of the Maze Board who are sympathetic to the protesters and have made comments to prison staff in October which had an adverse affect [sic] on morale... Letters were sent to the two members pointing out the effects which their comments had had. Both men have written that their comments must have been misunderstood.*



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## PART THREE - ARMAGH

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## PART THREE - ARMAGH

### INTRODUCTION

Armagh Gaol, Northern Ireland's oldest prison, was built between 1780 and 1819 to hold 'felons', debtors and women. Throughout the 20th Century during periods of political unrest it was used to imprison Republican women, including Second World War internees. From 1972 to 1975 women active in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) were interned without trial for up to three years. From 1972 to 1998, just under four thousand women passed through the prison system, approximately half of whom were interned or on remand. The sharp increase in women's imprisonment in the early 1970s led to overcrowding, compounded by the prison also being used as a boys' borstal and an 'overspill' for male internees. In 1974 Armagh's Republican women were designated 'A Company' of the IRA. The British Government's policy of criminalisation had a profound impact on politically-affiliated women in Armagh. They rejected 'criminal' status and from March 1976 demanded the restoration of political status. Although not compelled to wear prison uniforms, they rejected the regime, refused prison work, lost remission and were confined to extended lock-down in their cells.

A priest interviewed by the Panel recalled the Armagh regime prior to the incarceration of political prisoners. The Governor at the time, '*had a terrific way with him, in being moderate and advancing the benefit of the women prisoners*'. However, when politically-affiliated prisoners arrived, many of the '*older prison officers ... were ex-soldiers and they were concerned with discipline*'. Yet, '*things were fine and things progressed, and these improvements came with education [classes]*'. The regime remained relatively flexible, the Governor and guards benefitting from considerable discretion in policy implementation. In 1979, however, a new Governor advocating a strong disciplinary approach took charge of the prison. Security became the principal priority and inevitably resulted in conflict. A former woman prisoner described the immediate impact of the change in regime:

*He [the new Governor] was only there a matter of weeks when we were down to the hotplate at lunchtime. Before we knew, all these male screws came in riot gear, shields everything. We were just standing at the lunch table ready to get our lunch served. They started trailing us and threw us into the association room, about this size.*

*They were beating the girls and pulling us by the hair. Some of the girls ran over to this other wee room and they dragged them out and threw them into the big room. When they got us all ... into the big room, it was very traumatic and very frightening ... there were three flights of stairs from A1, A2, A3 and the male screws were lined the whole way down, standing with shields. When they called your name, you had to go out onto the wing on your own. You had to walk the whole way up and they were standing smirking at you, making remarks as you were passing.*

From that moment the prison transformed from operating a regular regime to an explicitly authoritarian regime, combining verbal and physical intimidation alongside deprivation of basic facilities:

*And then they wouldn't let you out to the toilet. We were dying to use the chamber pots. They wouldn't, and then after three days they opened the toilet door for one girl. [She] went out to go to the toilet and on the way up she stopped at the OC's door. They had opened the door to let her out to the toilet, and they stopped her, or they grabbed her and trailed her back down into her cell. Well, that was the end. No-one else was willing to go back out onto the wing. And it was all-male screws and that's how it all basically came about because of the conditions they imposed on us. It was a deliberate change of policy.*

Under the previous regime, on behalf of prisoners, the political OC (prisoners' Commanding Officer), negotiated changes in policy and specific concerns with the Governor who '*acknowledged us as political prisoners*'. Thus, the '*command structure ... always worked*'. However, '*from the new Governor came in, the screws ... said 'We can't do that no more. The Governor says it has to be done this way''*'. The chaplain considered that ending Special Category Status was a '*disaster*', throwing the regime into '*disarray*'. He stated that the '*new Governor*' embarked on '*combat for control, as outside [prison], as to who was boss*'. The change in operational regime was a Northern Ireland Office initiative. Political status was denied to women prisoners through the imposition of criminal status. As the following sections demonstrate, the new dispensation was an authoritarian regime with the twin objectives of breaking prisoners' resolve and defeating their resistance.

In her evidence to the Panel, a woman former prisoner stated:

*In retrospect, Armagh was a constant litany of human rights abuses, with solitary confinement, loss of remission, strip-searching, lockups, beatings, taunts, total inhumanity and apathy from the Brits and the prison regime ... we resisted the criminalisation policy of the British Government with all our essence, but they must be held to account for the torture, inhuman and degrading treatment of the women in Armagh. Questions need to be asked as to why so many of the women that were on the protest are dead from cancer and why the vast majority of us are suffering from either cancer-related illnesses or severe respiratory problems.*

## PHYSICAL ABUSE

Under the new regime, the Governor adjudicated women prisoners in his office rather than in their cells. Five women prisoners refused the order to be escorted to his office, remaining in their cells. In riot gear, guards came to the cells, twisted women's arms behind their backs, striking their heads and faces. A former woman prisoner recalled being lifted by six guards and taken via stairs to a different area of the prison. She was dropped from a height onto the stairs, dragged by her legs, her head striking each stair as they descended three flights. She was thrown into her cell, kicked in the back and verbally abused. In her submission to the Panel she named two men and a woman as the three principal perpetrators.

Another woman stated, '*there was a constant threat of physical abuse*', most intense when women were taken to and from their cells. The February 1980 attack, referred to above, during which a woman prisoner was punched by a male guard, then struck across the back of her head with a metal tray, demonstrated the severity of the new regime. They were herded into the association room and assaulted. Returning to their cells one by one they were forced to run a gauntlet of guards who shouted in their faces: '*Fenian whores*'. Other prisoners verify the attack one of whom stated that a male prison officer, '*grabbed me, threw me over his shoulder, and then onto the ground, knocking me unconscious*'.

*It was mad, they were just like throwing us everywhere and beating us and throwing us about. It was like they were enjoying themselves. There were women crying, there were other ones hysterical and ones who looked like they had been injured. [Name] had a big red eye that was starting to bruise.*

Dressed in riot gear, four guards - three men, one woman - went into a prisoner's cell and held her down on the bed, kneeling on her chest and legs. They dragged her cellmate from the cell and down the stairs, '*before giving her a bad beating*'.

According to women former prisoners, the authorities claimed that cell searches were justified, the purpose being to confiscate any clothing that was black as it was used by women prisoners to commemorate comrades who had died in the Conflict. Previously this had not been an issue and no warning was given by the authorities:

*Clothes is what they found ... there was no uniform for women in the North of Ireland, so women were never asked to wear a uniform. It wasn't there. We were allowed to have our own clothes inside. What they did was any clothes, any shoes, anything that was black which they seen as a uniform was all removed from the cell. They took any books that would have had anything, any political books were all removed.*

Ironically, on the day of the attack independent visitors were in the jail:

*They weren't helpful at all. They were supposed to be independent visitors, overseeing rights of the prisoners and they were more friendly with the prison staff and the prison regime at all times. After the riot on 7th February, a court case was taken about all the prisoners who were injured at that time. I wasn't even brought to the hearing because the court case was shut down, by the judge apparently, before it even went ahead.*

Having been beaten by the riot squad the women were locked down for three days, unable to empty their chamber pots: '*This is how the no-wash protest commenced*'. It was a direct response to the brutality they had endured:

*We all returned to our cells. There used to be a buzzer, if people wanted to go out to the toilet. That usually wasn't answered anyway. So, we just kept buzzing, and this wasn't answered for three days. And then by that stage, we only ever had one chamber pot in the cells between two people. And then the chamber pots were poured under the doors to try and get rid of the smell in the place. It was absolutely stinking. Women were bruised, were beaten and were injured. I remember at the time, lying flat on my back because my back was in agony ... My back has never been right again. And from the way they jumped on me on that day, I took a large lump on my breast afterwards. And I always believed it was because of the weight of that man putting his*



*knees on my chest. And I had to go into hospital the following year and have that lump removed. But the no-wash protest started basically because the prison staff wouldn't let us use toilets.*

Confined to their cells for three days, eventually, the women were allowed to exercise in the yard. A male guard with an Alsatian guard dog followed one of the women who was so frightened she was physically sick. While the majority of guards were women, male guards were involved in the attacks. Aggression towards Republican prisoners was inevitable as *'most prison officers were from a Loyalist background'*.

An explanation given to prisoners for guards' violence was the necessity of conducting cell searches. However, cell searches did not explain why the guards were *'wholly too heavy-handed'*. Women prisoners considered cell searches to be a *'pretence'*, to *'give them something to do or to get at us'*. In fact, abuse became *'routine'* and women anticipated beatings during *'searches, adjudications and going to Mass'*. Often assaulted from behind, punches were aimed at the back of prisoners' heads. In their submissions, several women name particular prisoners who were *'beaten regularly'*. A former prisoner recalled the targeting of a young woman perceived by guards as *'attractive ... any opportunity to have her punched in the face, or whatever, they took it'*. Assaults also included *'Stamping on them. You know, literally pounding on them'*.

Another woman described being kicked in her back by a male guard and hitting her head on a metal pipe in the cell. She suffered another assault after guards attempted to arrest her sister during a visit. Moving between prison wings several women guards punched her, repeatedly hitting her head against a wall. Yet following this attack she was charged with assaulting guards. She identified two women guards who were *'particularly evil towards the prisoners'*, their violence openly displaying sectarian hatred directed at Republican women. Both guards were named repeatedly in testimonies given by other women prisoners.

The inhumane conditions and vicious assaults endured by prisoners in Armagh, especially those directed against younger women, included purposeful attempts to degrade their humanity by focusing on their femininity. Old decrepit cells, built over a hundred years earlier to accommodate one prisoner, were unsuitable for two people sharing a chamber pot and two baths on a wing holding forty prisoners. Physical degradation was compounded by lack of ventilation in the cells, as windows were boarded up: *'the cells were not washed for the first*

*three months of the no-wash protest'*. Menstruating women were forced to request a single sanitary towel: *'the whole experience was a form of mental torture, as the prisoners had no rights whatsoever ... the fact that when my period came, I needed up to five towels per day and only got two, exemplified this indignity'*.

There was no sink nor running water in the cells. One woman had an illness causing her to vomit and guards regularly refused to allow her to empty the chamber pot. Denied toilet access, the contents of chamber pots that had been put out on the landings by prisoners were thrown back under cell doors. Guards then flooded the cells, using a hose through the peep-hole in cell doors.

*Well, [Name] and I were in bed and we were in the first cell which was a double cell but the way the wing was shaped our cell was a wee bit off ... The other side was straight. Ours wasn't. So the screws had access to our cell from outside, where the rest of the cells would have had barbed wire and things outside ... They put the hose in the cell and hit us from two or three feet away. So much so that when they hit us with the hose, it bounced us around the floor. It wasn't just a few seconds. It was a few minutes of the hose being trained on the two of us and we were literally bouncing around the floor with the force of the hose that was coming in.*

A woman prisoner recalled that sanitary towels were not issued for six weeks, and they were restricted to one change of clothes each month. The No-Wash Protest was *'inhuman, degrading and horrific'*. For months she wore the same clothes and underwear while living with excrement in her cell. During menstruation, she was mocked by guards when she requested a tampon. At this low point, she felt completely dehumanised.

As in the H-Blocks, the catalogue of physical violence and violation in Armagh coincided with the withdrawal of Special Category Status for those sentenced in 1976 and beyond. Poor sanitation, inhumane living conditions and inedible food led to illness, including anorexia. The Armagh former chaplain stated:

*Most of those already sentenced that weren't special category went on protest and they were locked up, severe lock-ups, and that was affecting them ... from then and further on you had a lot of sickness ... you had a kind of defeminisation. You know, women's natural ... crossing from teenage years and right on and doing long sentences and you had some of them becoming very ill ... One was about ten stone ... fell down to about five*

*stone. And there were others that got ill as well, some with depression ... Within a few years, you had maybe half a dozen whose health was deteriorating very badly.*

Filth and squalor in the cells were overwhelming, a source of disease and infections:

*... for a number of months, I think they probably didn't clear out the cells. So when you went into A Wing, I was hopping over all the urine that was in the corridor and whatever because they were throwing it under the door. They put excrement on the walls and sometimes they threw it out the window. But then they put up covers on the windows from the outside so that their cells were nearly dark.*

Asked if women's statements were exaggerated regarding the prevalence of random beatings, twenty-three hour lock-down, no exercise and contaminated food, the former chaplain replied: *'No, it's true. Because I sent a report every year, the Chaplain had to do it, to the Northern Ireland Office. No, it's no exaggeration'*.

He recalled guards' hostility towards prisoners increasing as a consequence of their colleagues being attacked and killed outside the prison. Aggressive searches of prisoners attending Mass increased, prisoners' correspondence was restricted, and cell searches became more violent. On one occasion, male guards were deployed and *'there was a whole line-up and a fight developed out of it. So they [women prisoners] were beaten'*.

During menstruation, the regime's failure in its duty of care, together with guards' mocking responses, amounted to cruel and inhuman treatment breaching prison rules and international conventions. It formed part of a cycle of abuse directed towards Republican women prisoners. There is now a significant record of the impact strip searches had on women prisoners held in Armagh, and subsequently in Mourne House, Maghaberry. The regularity and invasiveness of strip searches used in Ireland and England against Republican women was inhumane, degrading and used persistently to break the solidarity of the women's protest.

Strip searches were conducted on admission to prison, before and after court appearances, before and after visits from family or lawyers, and randomly without reason. A former woman prisoner stated she was forced to endure repeat strip searches when she took visits from her father and on the whim of guards who used the excuse of searching for 'contraband'. A particular guard, named in several statements, demanded that women prisoners remove sanitary

towels in the presence of male guards. A former prisoner revealed that the humiliation she endured during repeated, physically intrusive strip searches has had a long-term impact on her life: *'You felt it. You felt it. I mean, you felt that they were just so degrading'*.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

A former prisoner recalled a Governor's indifference when he informed her *'in a cold matter-of-fact way'* that her grandmother had died. Distraught, she was *'injected to calm her down'*. It was typical of a regime that lacked humanity, one in which women felt *'mentally tortured'* by constant insults and appalling conditions exacerbated by the unpredictability of physical violence including soakings when the hose was fired into their cells. Guards directed *'constant verbal abuse'* and name-calling at the women, including the derogatory term *'shit throwers'*. Their testimonies revealed the consequences of psychological degradation and callous treatment suffered when they embarked on the protest.

The woman whose grandmother died withdrew from the protest following further news that her father had suffered a heart attack and had not long to live. In what she considers was a deliberate attempt to alienate her from her comrades she was left on the wing for three days. She suffered a *'complete mental breakdown'* and was referred to a prison psychiatrist. Realising her vulnerability, however, the *'psychological abuse by the prison officers, worsened'*. They taunted her, constantly banging on her cell door.

The collective *'fear of prison staff and the consequences of confrontation, no matter how small, led to great levels of anxiety'*. Thus the threat of beatings and the endurance of persistent abuse created a climate, sustained by guards' hostility, of psychological suffering, of a *'great deal of mental distress'*. A former prisoner, aged eighteen at the time, recalled guards intentionally depriving women of sleep, flicking lights on and off throughout the night and banging cell doors. The prisoners also endured constant pressure and misinformation regarding possible release dates:

*They kept putting you up on petty charges to take more of your remission ... It was psychological abuse, it was cruel and traumatic ... even at the time, 'Oh my God, what's going to happen next?' or 'What are they going to do next?'*

Another former prisoner reflected on the hostility she endured while giving birth. She was taunted by guards *'mentioning to me that I would not survive'*. A particularly vindictive example that *'has remained*

*with me forever'* was a comment made by a woman guard to a prisoner who was a mother:

*'Did you know when you were born, they threw the wain away and kept the afterbirth?' So, we were just the 'afterbirth'. We talked about that. Do you know what I mean? ... That was the type of things she [names the guard] would have used.*

Verbal abuse, both political and personal, was constant. Guards attempted to identify and exploit any emotional or psychological weakness to break women prisoners' will and pressure them to leave the protest. When a prisoner's father was dying, she was refused compassionate leave unless she ended the protest. The Roman Catholic Cardinal and other supporters intervened, securing her leave. She was strip-searched on leaving and on returning to jail.

The psychological impact of abuse, regularly sectarian and always derogatory, was central to guards' attempts to destroy prisoners' resolve. It underpinned the constant fear of physical attack and degradation from women guards, and also from their male associates. That fear, isolation in prison and from the community outside, the censoring and destruction of correspondence and the appalling conditions in which they were held, have resulted in severe, long-term anxiety and mental ill-health for many women.

The sense of isolation was profound. Women recalled the emotion of feeling cut off, abandoned, that their suffering was unknown to the world outside:

*You have to realise that, at that time in prison, we were locked up so much in the cells we didn't think we had rights. We didn't feel we had anyone to turn to. We were in that prison under the British Government and as Irish Republican prisoners we didn't feel that there was anyone on our side basically.*

Inside the prison constant lock-down, loss of remission and persistent abuse denied prisoners hope that their physical and psychological deprivations would end. Opening with the most searing recollection of her incarceration, the following statement clearly articulates the cumulative impact:

*I think probably the claustrophobia, the actual memory of the cells itself ... Then there was always that feeling you were never getting out. So, I wake up very often with that feeling of claustrophobia and that I can't get out. You know, like you're locked in forever. Because you know they never gave you a proper release date. I mean, I got my release date about a week before I was released, after nearly nine years ... And my mother who, as I said, was a widow woman with ten children and was a beautiful lady, just lived for asking*

*me when my release date was. I couldn't even give her that. And even when I did within the last week, I told her to be prepared for that date to change. Because I wasn't sure in that last week, or even that last morning, if there would be a situation where a prison officer would say 'OK you're on report and we are taking remission'. And it just went on like that all the time.*

## HYGIENE

Without in-cell sanitation women prisoners were compelled to use a single chamber pot and its emptying depended on guards' discretion. For women suffering illness and requiring frequent access to a toilet, this was particularly cruel and certainly unhygienic. As stated previously, guards threw the contents of chamber pots under cell doors. Cells were hosed through the spy-hole with women still inside. Menstruation was used as a mechanism of control, a natural function of the women's bodies used as degradation and punishment. A woman recalled a six-week period when sanitary towels were not provided.

*... when we first went in, there was a tuck shop where our family was allowed to leave money in our account. So, we would have been able to buy sanitary wear, or we could have had them sent in. Then, after you were sentenced, and we were on a no-work protest we looked after what we used and cleaned it ourselves. At that stage, we were down to a visit once a month and we didn't get parcels. We didn't get things ... because we were on the protest ... on the no-work protest, to begin with, you would have gone every day and got what you needed, maybe four or five towels. As that protest went on and tensions and things got worse, then they decided how or what we needed. So, you might have been given a packet of sanitary towels and told 'That's it'. You just wouldn't go along and ask for them or they would have told you 'Three a day' or whatever. It was handed out like that. We had a thing with ourselves that we didn't go to visit the doctor unless we were very sick.*

Her periods ceased while she was on the protest, 'and it was a long, long time in prison before I got a period again ... eighteen months'. Her situation was not untypical, 'I would say, that the majority of prisoners lost their periods during the time [in prison]. I would say two or three months, then I didn't have another period for 18 months'. Women expressed outrage at how menstruation was used as a form of control and degradation:

*... when I first went into prison, I was a remand prisoner and the first time I had my period one of the other prisoners said to me 'You just go*



*down to the surgery and ask one of the prison officers to give you sanitary towels'. I thought, 'No way. That's so embarrassing'. You had to go right down the whole wing, down the stairs, to ask for a sanitary towel. I was so embarrassed, and somebody went and did that for me, and they wouldn't give the sanitary towels to them. I remember at the time, it was the OC who went down. I went to her and said, 'What do you do? Do you get these sent in or are they supplied?' She said, 'You go down each time and you ask', and I said, 'Do you have to ask every time?' So that went on for almost nine years. You asked every time. During the no-work protest, it was like they didn't give you enough sanitary towels. During the no-wash protest ... then we threw out the chamber pot onto the wing. The sanitary towel would have been in the chamber pot thrown out onto the wing.*

A former prisoner described being humiliated by men and women guards when attending a family visit during menstruation:

*It was a monthly visit. You got a visit once a month and you had to go into an area that was previously a shower room. You went in there and the screws would have searched you. There was always about three or four prison officers but there were always male officers standing sort of around the door ... While she was searching me, she said "What's that?" and I said 'That's my sanitary towel' and she said 'Show me' and I said 'No', and once I said 'No' the other two prison officers grabbed me by the arm. One had me by the neck and [Name] was trying to open my trousers to take the sanitary towel out. The male prison officers were standing at the door looking at this.*

During the No-Wash Protest prisoners were denied toilet access:

*There was all these male screws on the wing and you were afraid to go out in case you were going to get a hiding. And for the first six weeks, they wouldn't give us any sanitary towels and a number of girls had taken their periods, including myself, and we had two grey blankets and we tore the blankets up and used that as a sanitary towel.*

Another former prisoner stated that living in the same clothes, including underwear, for months was 'inhuman, degrading and horrific'. When she requested a tampon during menstruation guards responded with laughter.

## MEDICAL CARE

### Physical and mental health care

It was clear throughout the women's interviews, consistent with the experiences of male prisoners, that they viewed doctors and medical orderlies as part of a system of oppression rather than independent professionals caring for patients' best interests:

*We never got to see a doctor. If we asked the screws to see a doctor, they would have asked you 'Why?'. We didn't have access to a doctor. You had to be very ill or very sick before you would have got to see a doctor.*

Under immense stress, a woman prisoner attempted to take her own life. Another woman who was close to her states that the medical response was neither sympathetic nor appropriate:

*Her brother had been in prison and he got out of prison and came to visit her. When she came back to the cell that night, she had a total breakdown and she had attempted suicide. She had cut her wrists. So, it took quite a while. She shared a cell with [Name] who was screaming out of the cell to the OC what had happened. The OC was trying to get the screws to come up. It took quite a while before they opened the cell door to get in and the Doctor came in that night and stitched [Name] without any anaesthetic. That was how they treated people who attempted to commit suicide because he believed that if they addressed us in a civil compassionate sort of manner they would keep offending and get the attention. So, if no attention was given, they wouldn't make an attempt again. Doctor [Name] told that to the OC, who went the next day to see the Governor to complain about how the whole event had been handled.*

What followed demonstrates clearly the institutional relationship between the prison administration and medical care:

*So, she went the next day and had a meeting with the Governor and either Doctor [Name] was brought in or she later met with Doctor [Name] and the Governor told the OC the reason why they did what they did. So, he stitched her up without any anaesthetic and didn't take her out of the cell that night ... She was taken the next day over to the prison hospital wing for two or three hours, then maybe three or four days for a couple of hours. He said if he took her off the wing, she would lead herself to believe that if she kept doing this, she would eventually be taken off the wing. So, they had to make it very clear that*



*she wasn't leaving the wing and that this sort of behaviour wasn't going to be tolerated. And that was Doctor [Name].*

In another case, a former prisoner reflected on the ambivalence of medical staff in dealing with an injury to another prisoner:

*Dr [Name] had prisoners carried into him for adjudications and this did not bother him ... medical treatment was negligent, as the prison doctor, Dr [Name], did not care about the prisoners ... she tore a cartilage in her leg, and was left for a day before being seen ... It was then around another week before she was taken to Craigavon Hospital for treatment.*

A woman former prisoner, clearly suffering from an eating disorder – consuming food and repeatedly vomiting – did not receive appropriate treatment, nor was she referred to hospital:

*Prior to the no-wash protest [Name] and I shared the cell for seven months and she did have access to the doctor because her illness meant that she had to eat ... she was allowed extra food in 'to feed the illness' ... They gave her maybe ten tins every night ... like a catering tin of beans. Those tins would have been full of vomit and overflowing before the morning. The OC tried to help. We should have been allowed to go out of the cell during the night to empty those. We weren't allowed out to do that, so that vomit was there from when we were locked up, right through until we got out in the morning.*

Within the prison necessary treatment was declined:

*... she was rapidly losing weight and indeed she was only four stone ... she reports that she essentially received no medical treatment. Whilst on protest, they would let her eat or let her health deteriorate. Every so often, they would send her to remand to get treatment. On the remand wing, she would get fluids and, when she improved, she would be sent back and would re-join the protest. This cycle would then be repeated. The doctor in Armagh Jail [Name] would not do anything to help her ... He said to her, 'You're going to die if you continue on this protest and I will not be responsible'. Despite being aware of her condition, she remained prohibited from receiving food parcels which would have greatly aided her ... Dr [Name] should have declared her unfit to perform prison work. If he had done so, she would have been moved to the remand wing and she would have been entitled to receive food parcels. Dr [Name] refused to declare her unfit for work and said that she was anorexic, in order*

*to cover up her real illness ... medical staff in Armagh were completely negligent.*

She was given fluids intravenously, not by fully trained medical staff but by guards trained as medical orderlies. As there was concern she might die in prison, she was transferred to hospital and eventually released due to poor health. In her evidence she stated that while on the protest her stomach illness gradually worsened. She attributed her near-death to the conditions under which women prisoners were held and the prison's failure to provide appropriate medical treatment.

In discussing institutional failures in the duty of medical care, a prison chaplain recalled a particular incident:

*... an eighteen-year-old boy was shot dead in Ballymurphy. And he'd a sister, seventeen years of age, interned. And I got a notice before twelve o'clock from Ballymurphy that he had been shot ... and I had to go and then tell [his sister] ... the women used to listen to the five-to-twelve news and she would have heard it on the news ... There was just a year between them. They were very close. She screamed and screamed. The doctor was sent for. He came. He walked in with his bag and he said, 'Drop her on the bed'. So, two women officers held her down on the bed and pulled down her pants and he gave her an injection in the backside and then he walked out.*

Former prisoners raised concerns about prescribed drugs administered while in prison. One woman suffered a mental breakdown, was seen by different psychiatrists and prescribed a range of drugs which she listed as 'Stelazine, Tortrinol, Tryptizol, Largactil, Prothiaden, Anafranil, Dalmane, Valium, Temazepam'. She identified the underlying cause of her breakdown to be the guilt she experienced because she left the protest. She 'suffered profoundly' as a consequence of her incarceration and could not recall the date of her release. The prison doctor, 'simply did not care about my condition'. Following her breakdown, she was not treated at an outside hospital and described the 'prison hospital' as being just 'two cells'.

Another former prisoner stated that the prison doctor 'never consulted the prisoners and Benlyn was prescribed for everything'. There were constant delays in the provision of medical treatment. She suffered from boils while on the No-Wash Protest and was subjected to a long delay before receiving antibiotics. Following a serious assault by guards, during which they used excessive force, a heavily bruised prisoner was given two tablets assumed to be painkillers by a medical officer. There was no thorough examination of the injuries she had

sustained, but a cursory lift of her tee-shirt by the doctor who simply stated: *'You will be alright'*.

Collusion between medical staff and prison guards was obvious to women prisoners, *'as they knew how the prisoners were being treated'*. The medical officer *'was just an ordinary prison officer'* and the doctor *'who worked in the prison, was very friendly with the prison officers'*. A former woman prisoner stated, *'it didn't matter if you were standing with black eyes or anything, he was on the side of the system. He would turn a blind eye and write a different report that would suit the prison officer and the prison machine'*. Another former prisoner considered the medical referral process inhibited consultations. Despite recurring health concerns throughout her time in Armagh she never had an appointment with a doctor; they *'did not care about prisoners'*, concluding that *'medical treatment was negligent'*. Further, well aware of physical abuse and mental torment suffered by prisoners *'medical personnel colluded with prison officers'*. Other former prisoners also claimed that medical staff and guards protected each other's interests.

Regarding dental care, a dentist made occasional visits:

*I don't know whether it was just me ... but every time I needed a wee filling he had no novocaine. I used to sit ... hanging onto the chair for dear life, so I did, because there's a screw sitting there. But he was forever forgetting his novocaine ... You know, that was his attitude, so it was. But no, that's the level of care... Like, I care for my dogs better than we were cared for, you know.*

## **Pregnancy and birth**

A former prisoner was asked if concessions were made for women who arrived in prison pregnant. She replied:

*Absolutely not. They were treated and got the same food as us. Everything the protesting prisoners was issued with, that's exactly what those girls got. They didn't have anything special, right up until those babies were born. If anything, those girls were taken from that wing and were brought back immediately after that baby was born.*

The following response demonstrates the lack of care provided to pregnant women:

*[Name 1] was pregnant when I was on remand. [Name 2] was pregnant. And then later on she wasn't on the same wing as us, [Name 3] was pregnant. There were pregnant women came and went during my time there ... I would say [Name 1] didn't receive the proper medical treatment. For a young girl in prison who was pregnant, she*

*didn't receive any advice or any proper medical treatment. She was just living the same way as the rest of us, which was under very rough, grim circumstances. And again, two baths on a wing with so many women ... There was [Name 4] who was expecting too when she was in prison. So, they would have been treated the same as the other prisoners. The food was horrendous and for a pregnant woman to be eating that food, I can't imagine. I wouldn't have wanted to eat any of that while I was pregnant.*

A former prisoner discussed the medical treatment she received before giving birth to her first child. She was suffering from toxemia, protein in her urine and swelling of the oedema, and high blood pressure. She received no initial hospital maternity consultation or assessment, nor did she receive a scan. Eventually admitted to hospital, neither the doctor nor the obstetrician had a record of her previous treatment, despite having been diagnosed by the prison doctor as suffering from toxemia. She had been punched in the stomach and a guard taunted her that she would not survive. After the birth, her baby was taken from her for a week with neither a medical nor a security explanation offered.

She told the Panel that when she was taken to hospital to give birth, she was handcuffed and *'in the operating theatre I was handcuffed to the bed by two hands ... the screw was in the operating theatre along with RUC'*. The police officers were *'male and female'* and *'were extremely hostile'*. Hospital doctors objected to the presence of the prison guard and police officers but *'it fell on deaf ears'* and they remained. Following the birth, she received no visits from a midwife, a health visitor or doctor: *'the only time I saw [the prison doctor] was in effect after I came back, after I went in demanding to have my daughter back ... He never examined nor treated me whatsoever after [her baby] was born. I was put in the hospital wing and left there'*. Transferred to the prison hospital having had a caesarean section the risk of infection was significant, heightened by poor conditions in the prison hospital and the presence of carcinogenic toxins.

## **TOXIC CLEANING AGENTS**

Consistent with the H-Block testimonies, women prisoners raised concerns about the toxicity of chemicals and the regularity of their use. Further concern focused on asbestos degrading within the structural fabric of the old prison. It was present throughout the heating and insulation systems and extensively elsewhere. The prison authorities, however, were unable to provide the Panel with

any information on the extent of asbestos within the prison's construction and repair. A former woman prisoner stated:

*Perhaps, even more serious than contact with these chemicals was [Name] contact with asbestos, which was only discovered years later to have existed within the prison. She believes her constant exposure to asbestos and possible exposure to the harmful cleaning chemicals has played a major role in the development of respiratory issues from which she now suffers.*

As discussed previously, lack of ventilation in cells, particularly following the use of toxic cleaning chemicals, led to prisoners' breaking windows for fresh air. The windows remained broken into the winter months with rain coming into bitterly cold cells:

*We didn't have any windows. We went on the protest in February and then, as the Summer approached, there was a lack of air in the cells. So, we had put the windows out to get air and then when it went back to Wintertime, we didn't have any windows. So, it was freezing cold all the time. There was a twelve-inch pipe running through the cells and that's where the heating came from and that was the only source of heat. All the time, what we would have done was maybe put on a coat or put something up at the window and it didn't stop the cold but it would have stopped the rain from coming in ... because the bed was under the window, that was to stop the rain from coming in on top of you. We would have used some of our clothing to put up at the window.*

A woman former prisoner stated that cell cleaning caused considerable discomfort and, subsequently, a considerable number of women have suffered serious illnesses:

*As far as I'm aware, the majority of women who were on the dirty protest all now suffer ... from serious respiratory problems and cancer-related illnesses, and I firmly lay the blame on the conditions which we had to endure in Armagh.*

As the experiences of H-Block prisoners demonstrate, a humanitarian response requires appropriate medical tests for all former prisoners whose current health concerns could be linked to their exposure to cleaning products known to be, or suspected of being, carcinogenic or otherwise toxic.

## ADJUDICATIONS

### Cellular confinement

Confined to cells, women prisoners experienced serious deterioration in health due to lack of fresh air, minimal physical exercise and poor diet. They considered this combination of factors contributed to serious menstrual problems and hair loss. Locked in cells for twenty-four hours each day, they were allowed one hour for 'physical activity' and 'recreation' but this 'depended on the screws themselves'. Guards gave paltry excuses for failing to unlock such as 'the lunch was late ... that was a lie as the lunch was never late, it had just been left sitting'. In her submission, a former prisoner concluded that confinement to cells was a deliberate administrative policy to punish women on the protest. She described her imprisonment as 'torture'. In B Wing, she was locked in her cell for nineteen hours every day. When transferred to A Wing, throughout the 'no-wash protest', lockdown was increased to twenty-three hours and visits were restricted to thirty minutes each month. For two years of her sentence she was isolated in her cell.

### Loss of remission

When women began the protest they were well aware they would lose remission. They were regularly informed by the Governor that persistent protest effectively lengthened their sentences. For one woman interviewed, loss of remission amounted to two years and eight months and, exacerbated by solitary confinement, 'had a massive psychological effect'. Women were never certain about their release date because 'they kept putting you up on petty charges to take more of your remission'.

*You just sort of knew ... you've lost all your remission. Because they told us at the beginning ... 'The more you stay on the protest the more you've lost your remission'.*

By 26th January 1978, twenty-one women prisoners had lost thirteen years' remission between them. One woman already had passed the date on which she would have been released had she not participated in the protest. While most remained strong, some were broken by the persistent pressure. All have experienced long-term consequences. Loss of remission was a significant element in pressuring women prisoners to conform to the regime. As in the H-Blocks, women's protest was directed against the policy of criminalisation and against the UK Government's determination to break their resolve by impelling conformity to prison regulations as 'ordinary' prisoners. Their determination to retain



political status, however, not only had severe personal consequences of isolation, deprivation and subjugation but also impacted on their families.

## FOOD AS PUNISHMENT

Women former prisoners criticised the poor quality of the food, stating it was used to pressurise those on the protest by breaking their morale:

*You always knew what you were getting on a Monday; what you got every Tuesday; every Wednesday. It was always swimming in grease. It was sloppy ... It wasn't nice but you ate it. You needed to eat. During the no-wash protest, for over a year, they used to open one cell at a time. They fed one prisoner. So, if they started at that quarter of the wing, by the time they went right round, the food was absolutely freezing, swimming in hard grease and you just took it anyway. A couple of times, I just threw it back. Then, I thought, 'What did I do that for?' because it meant you starved. No. The food wasn't sufficient and the other food, I don't know what you would call it really. Like I love potatoes and cabbage and I always did but I don't know how you get cabbage with grease on it. I still don't understand that. We used to laugh about it in Armagh.*

The poor condition of food and how it was served contributed to the inhumanity and degradation imposed on women prisoners. In contrast, whenever officials visited, the meals improved significantly:

*The diet in Armagh was very meagre. While we were locked up in our cells during the no-wash you would have heard like a big steel trolley getting wheeled onto the wing. You heard the gates open and the steel trolley, you got to know what the sounds were. And the steel trolley was brought up onto the wing and sometimes it would have sat there for a half-hour to an hour before the screws started opening the door and letting you out, one at a time. And you had to walk along a big long wing to get up to where the trolley was. It was very, very intimidating. You had a plastic cup and a plastic plate, by that time the food was just completely cold. It was normally just porridge in the mornings and a slice of bread with margarine. Most of the time for like lunch, it would have been soup, maybe, or sometimes a bit of lettuce and a tomato which would have been warm because they set it on the hotplate. It was sitting for an hour and was completely wilted. At night-time, most of the time, it was like congealed sausages with cold chips. You always knew when a visitor was coming onto the wing because there was a lovely dinner made of chicken and*

*chips and we knew right away there was visitors coming onto the wing because we were being fed proper food.*

Memories of food, its poor quality and contamination, remained vivid as the following three statements testify:

*And the food... Oh, Lord. To this day - and it's over thirty years from when we were in jail - I have never ate a fish finger or mushy peas since, because one of the things the cook used to make was fish fingers. But he must have bought cheap fish. It was disgusting, and the smell lingered for days. It was absolutely disgusting.*

*... there was a chef. Although, whether he was ever trained I don't know, do you know what I mean? Because he wasn't much of a cook, to say the least ... even the likes of vegetables were overcooked to the point where you didn't get any goodness out of them.*

*... if you were going out for so-called breakfast in the morning, they would spit into that - I do believe the screws did spit into the food. I have absolutely no doubt whatsoever that they tampered with the food.*

One woman rejected prison food because it 'was just so disgusting you couldn't eat it'. She 'lived off jelly for most of the time' and lost two and a half stones in prison. Another woman stated that food parcels sent in from outside were withheld from prisoners, forcing them to rely on prison food which was 'nutritionally inadequate, lacking fruit and little to no veg'.

## VISITS

As discussed previously, for those engaged in the No-Work protest, visits were restricted to thirty minutes each month and closely monitored by guards: 'a prison officer would be standing there, hearing everything you said'. Family visits gave guards an opportunity to further degrade and humiliate women prisoners: 'We were strip-searched coming back, maybe thinking that our family members have given us anything'. Only allowed a maximum of three visitors, visits were particularly difficult for prisoners from large families:

*So, they sort of broke it up ... The mother or whatever would go up on every visit, but they might only see two sisters at a time, you know. So that could have been spread over a period, depending on the size of the family - sort of six to ten months really, you know. So, it was very hard on ones with big families ...*



Priests played a significant role in the protestors' lives. Sunday Mass provided an opportunity for prisoners to meet, converse and plan their resistance. The Armagh Chaplain caused particular concern to the prison authorities and the Northern Ireland Office, as a letter dated the 19th October 1978 from a W G James to a Mr Jackson, demonstrates:

*I realise it would be rather ham-handed to rush at this thing without considering the possible consequences. On the other hand, [he] is not playing the game as an officially appointed Chaplain to the prison; he cannot reasonably fulfil such a role when he is so obviously opposed to 'the system' and its methods of working.*

*Could we therefore not make an approach to the Bishop ... quoting examples of [the Chaplain's] efforts in the past and asking the Bishop if, in his*

*opinion, [the Chaplain] is the most suitable priest to hold such an official appointment? It could be that if we put our case convincingly enough the Bishop might be persuaded to see our point of view and might ask [him] to mend his ways and change his opinions –overtly, at least.*

*It is worth a try anyway and even if it accomplishes nothing it would be a shot across [the Chaplain's] bows. I accept that if the Bishop ... is Archbishop O'Fee we are not likely to accomplish much; on the other hand there may be a suffragan bishop to whom we could write.*

The handwritten note on the letter, seven months later and initialled SCJ, simply stated that the issue had been discussed 'from time to time' and the papers should be added to the 'file'.



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## PART FOUR - CONSEQUENCES

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## PART FOUR - CONSEQUENCES

### THE INEVITABLE CONSEQUENCE OF CRIMINALISATION

As stated at the outset of this Report, in late July 1978 Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich, Primate of all Ireland and Archbishop of Armagh, made an eleven-hour visit to the H-Blocks. He was scathing in his criticisms, particularly how confessions had been extracted from prisoners, that they had been subjected to trials without juries and that Special Category Status had been withdrawn from politically-affiliated prisoners. Derived in extensive testimonies of prisoners held in the H-Blocks and Armagh Jail, and on the accounts of others directly involved, the primary material gathered for this Report agrees with Cardinal Ó Fiaich's conclusion. The Report's findings provide in-depth, compelling evidence of the privations, abuse and assaults endured by men and women prisoners, some of whom were very young, within regimes that used excessive, arbitrary physical and mental punishments with impunity.

The evidence presented to the Panel affirms the 1978 European Court Ruling that the treatment routinely endured by prisoners was inhuman and degrading. Controversially, that Judgment rejected the charge that the privation and attacks amounted to torture despite the UN General Assembly's 1975 definition of torture as 'an aggravated and deliberate form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment'. In 1978 four prisoners challenged the Judgment. As stated previously, the UK Government did not seek to reverse the ruling regarding inhuman or degrading conditions within the prisons but rejected the proposition they amounted to torture. The European Commission concurred yet, significantly, considered that greater humanitarian interventions should have been made to end what it described as 'such a serious deadlock'.

While governors and guards used discretion in the daily functioning of the H-Blocks, the testimony of a former Governor shows that regime operation overall was directed by the Northern Ireland Office and the British Government. Alongside the extension of Special Powers in Diplock Courts, the Government's decision to criminalise politically-affiliated prisoners through the removal of Special Category Status ended the uneasy calm within prisons. Organised prisoner resistance to the hard-line response by those controlling and administering prisons was inevitable. Recruited almost exclusively from Unionist and Protestant communities, guards brought aggressive sectarianism openly into their

workplace. It was directed specifically but not exclusively against Catholic, Republican prisoners.

In contrasting the mass of documentary evidence held in the National Archives and the testimonies of former prisoners what is most striking is the abject failure by politicians and civil servants to recognise the level of violence used by guards in the routine operation of the prison regimes. The official documents remain focused on the removal of Special Category Status and the inevitability of consequent protest. They project reasonable, benign but unyielding management. Yet there was a neglectful, institutionalised failure to recognise the level of physical assault and psychological abuse inflicted routinely on prisoners by guards, intent on asserting often brutal authority. As the documents show, the prisons became primary sites for a propaganda battle in which the State's position was that privations endured by prisoners were self-inflicted; that prisons ran on the principle of humane containment. The objective, clearly evident in the documents, was the elimination from public consciousness that guards systemically abused their discretion to inflict sustained, serious harm on prisoners.

The relationship between policy and discretionary powers is well-illustrated in the following quotes:

*But the more we find out about what's going on the more it seems everything that they done, and it seems to be down to the last detail, was coordinated and planned by a higher policy. Not only by the NIO [Northern Ireland Office] but by the British Home Office ... if there's a guy comes in half-drunk, he can do whatever he wants, he can take it to extremes. As regards the decision on the wing to introduce mirror searches that was obviously a deliberate policy, not to give them any better security, just as another form of degradation.*

*From the NIO to Whitehall, wherever, it was through the POA [Prison Officers' Association] who were controlling everything. They were carrying out the orders of whoever was directing ... It was definitely the POA and through the key people in the POA.*

*It seems now that every single thing that happened was coordinated ... I just read that one of the first prisoners to be let out ... they had a discussion in Whitehall as to whether to cut his beard or not. Because this was going to be bad publicity ... There was a meeting about 'What should we*

*do about this guy, should we let him go or should we clean him up?’*

*Someone sat down to say, ‘We’re going to criminalise these people. We’re going to say that they’re not political, regardless of what the ramifications are going to be’. And interestingly, it was your man [Name], who was a probation officer in the ‘Cages’ at that time when they had political status, who wrote a paper at the time saying this is going to be a disaster because these people weren’t going to just accept this policy, there was going to be a reaction.*

When it became clear that the Blanket Protest was escalating, and prisoners would not be cowed by the deprivations and violence to which they were subjected, the frequency and intensity of guards’ physical assaults increased. This was viewed by prisoners as a purposeful, sustained attack to break their collective will. Their solidarity and prolonged determination to resist was not anticipated by British politicians, Northern Ireland civil servants or those operating the regime:

*I don’t think the prison authorities expected the protest to have lasted that length of time and I think there was a very deliberate attempt going into early ’78 to actually beat people off the protest before they got onto it. I think the understanding was that if they came down into the wings and get with the rest of us, then, that’s them probably going to be there [in the protest]. But if they can be broken before they get to that point, then so much the better.*

*...we had been allowed to go out for a shower twice a week and we were allowed out to the toilet. So, it was early 1978 when we started to notice very clearly that that was changing. It was very difficult to get access, showers were being curtailed, and brutality was increasing.*

In their testimonies, former prisoners stated that the No-Wash Protest began as a direct response to increased brutality:

*In March ’78, we started to withdraw cooperation in a very mild way at first, like refusing to brush out our cells ... we didn’t have many forms of protest ... which meant that within three days we were on a No-Wash Protest, you know, which was never envisaged.*

Collectively, however, prisoners were aware that the deprivations and violence perpetuated within the harsh regimes were ‘part of a much broader counterinsurgency programme, so the prisons were just going to be another element’. Beyond prisons, ‘courts were another one ... interrogation centres

*were another one. Diplock courts ... it’s just part of a pattern’.*

A former Governor described his frustration and helplessness at the time. Offering significant insight into pressure imposed by the UK Government on the Northern Ireland Prison Service, he demonstrated the impact on those whose views were not influenced by sectarianism yet were expected to implement discriminatory policies:

*It was driven primarily by direct rule, by people who were on a gravy train, jumping on a plane [from London], coming on a Monday morning, going home on a Thursday night. And they didn’t understand Northern Ireland, they didn’t understand the Irish issue, and they made policy decisions that essentially resulted in three and a half thousand people dead – military people, police, prison officers, over two thousand Catholics, one thousand five hundred Protestants. And this was happening in Western Europe. This was happening on the edge of what was always regarded to be one of the longest-standing democracies in the world. And people like me were just caught in the middle of that - we didn’t want to be.*

Those implementing Government policy became directly implicated in its objectives and he ‘could not stand four-square with myself’ as ‘some of the worst stuff that was happening in Northern Ireland emanated from prisons, and most of us - we can’t put our hands up and say we had nothing to do with it - were part of the problem’.

He recalled persistent attempts to advise the Northern Ireland Office and the British Government that their policies would fail and result in more deaths:

*We said, ‘Men will die and there will be lots and lots of people in the street will die because of this’. She [Thatcher] can’t say she wasn’t told. She was told from where it mattered most ... because there is a Government responsibility to maintain public order and there’s a Government responsibility to maintain life, to protect life ... I knew I could no longer justify being in the Service morally ... When I knew the Dirty Protest was starting, as far as I’m concerned that was one step too far ... It’s how the Government believed they would take this to the wire, they would take it to the tenth degree, they would break the mind of, in this case, Republicanism. And that’s what it was about. And I did not want to be part of that.*

It was this political context, with no room for negotiation, that enabled prison regimes to operate with discretion and impunity, not least in guards’

treatment of prisoners participating in the Blanket Protest. Physical and psychological abuse were given legitimacy by the regime's design and function in dealing with political prisoners. According to the testimonies to the Panel, systemic abuse of power was sectarian - directed towards Republican prisoners it reflected the reality that most prison guards were from a Protestant/ Unionist/ Loyalist background.

Prison guards considered Blanket Protestors as 'other ... from another community, from another place, from another tradition'. In the H-Blocks prejudices were fuelled by political and ideological division, most evident in inhuman, degrading, neglectful and torturous treatment. Prisoners suffered physical and psychological violence from guards so regularly that it became 'institutionalised'. It was accepted and internalised: 'You're imposing a power and authority that is vested in you, in the uniform you wear, knowing that you are not going to be disciplined for what you're about to do'.

When managers, guards, doctors and other staff, regardless of circumstances, perceive prisoners as a 'common enemy' the foundation is laid for dehumanisation and the removal of 'safeguards'. As an academic prison researcher stated to the Panel:

*Once you allow a process of institutionalised abuse to occur, there are those prison officers, those prison medics, those prison governors who become caught in that process ... who in other circumstances might not act directly in that way and the damage ... inflicted on them is significant also.*

Yet, systemic abuse of power within prisons, in all its manifestations, directly contravenes domestic and international human rights law. When abuses are incorporated into the operational policies and practices of the prison regime they shift from being discretionary actions of prison managers and guards and become the core ideology and purpose of those policies and practices.

It is clear from evidence presented to the Panel that the removal of Special Category Status and its replacement with the policy of criminalisation, literally overnight re-categorising political prisoners as 'ordinary' criminals, escalated violence and violations meted out by guards. Not only was this evident to line managers in the jails but also anticipated by the Northern Ireland Office and the highest offices of the British Government.

In his testimony to the Panel a former Governor, who self-defined as Protestant, stated that Governors were faced with 'an abnormal situation':

*None of us liked it. None of us understood it. None of us believed it would do what it was meant*

*to do, which was turn people away from any campaign, whether it was a Republican campaign or a Loyalist campaign.*

He considered that the Prison Service was not 'set up to fight a war' but to operate within a criminal justice system based on Due Process. In such circumstances, prisons operated:

*... to keep people alive, to make sure they had medical treatment ... they were fed ... they could see a chaplain if they wished, and ... they could see a welfare officer. It was simple. And I'll tell you under oath, most of us found the role [as Governors] that we were put into to be absolutely abnormal, obnoxious, and we didn't want anything to do with it.*

*... We told the Northern Ireland Office, we told the State, that it wouldn't work. There was a big problem in Northern Ireland and Ireland. It had to be resolved by Government, not by the Prison Service or the Police Service.*

Once the decision was taken to remove Special Category Status, however, the final element in the State's response to the Conflict was set. It followed a clear pattern: internment without trial; arrests under special powers; in-depth interrogations carried out using inhumane methods that amounted to torture; forced confessions; non-jury trials; questionable admissibility of evidence; unsafe convictions. At each stage, safeguards fundamental to the administration of the rule of law within a democracy were bypassed in a jurisdiction policed by the military and the secret service alongside the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The demand for Special Category Status was a direct response to the exceptionality of targeting and policing Republican communities and convictions that were secured through this process.

## LONG-TERM IMPACT

It is evident from the evidence heard by the Panel that physical and psychological harm inflicted on prisoners held in Crumlin Road, the H-Blocks and Armagh had a deleterious impact on their lives at the time. In many cases, this continued. It is important to record that a number of politically-affiliated former prisoners felt unable to attend the Panel and revisit the suffering they endured or remained in poor health. Others have died prematurely of illnesses directly attributed by their families to their time in jail. Physical illnesses include respiratory disorders, evident in upper and acute lower respiratory symptoms including Chronic Obstructive Airways Disease, attributed to exposure to toxic chemicals:



*At the minute, I am attending the hospital and the doctor with problems with breathing. And actually, I have got appointments this week. I had two appointments last week because I can't get a breath. I thought it was my age because I turned 60 in October, but I have been told it shouldn't be as bad as that ... I have never smoked in my life. I was told it shouldn't be as bad as it is.*

In addition to the broad range of physical illnesses suffered by former prisoners because of the conditions in which they were incarcerated, debilitation due to mental ill-health is a particular concern:

*I suffer now. Both mentally and physically. I have had arthritis for quite a few years now, but I have also been diagnosed with Fibromyalgia and I think it's all prison-related. But the more mental sort of aspect of it because you live with it every day. That would be the worst.*

Given the psychological impact of their treatment in prison it has become increasingly clear that an unbroken continuum exists, from their plight as young people through to the present day in communities where, often silently, they bear the scars of the Conflict. At the time of the protests, consistent with war veterans and survivors internationally, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) would not have been a consideration by most doctors in the North of Ireland.

A woman former prisoner detailed her struggle with what is now classified as Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, tracing her mental and physical debilitation back to the treatment inflicted on women prisoners in Armagh. The Panel's overview of her evidence is consistent with the testimonies recounted earlier in this report:

*... since her release, she has become OCD about cleanliness, in some instances getting up in the middle of the night to clean ... she states that she is on, and has been for some time, anti-depressant medication which she uses to cope with the trauma surrounding the past experiences. On a final note, she states on numerous occasions she would have been exposed to undiluted chemicals used to clean the cells. These would be poured through the window but also under the doors to the cells creating an extremely noxious environment. In addition to this, the wings were sprayed daily with disinfectant and on almost every occasion after the cell cleaning she would be put back into the cell and exposed once again to the noxious fumes. She believes that this contributed to the damage she now suffers to her lungs which gives her great difficulty in breathing. Additionally, she believes the cold conditions in which she was put*

*resulted in her developing Arthritis in her hands and contributed to her back problems as a result of having to sleep on many occasions on the wire frames of the bed due to mattresses having been soaked with a hose.*

In their testimonies, women prisoners expressed concern at the high rate of deaths among those with whom they were imprisoned. At the time they would have been aged seventeen to their early twenties. They were in their early sixties when they gave evidence:

*[Name 1] We buried her a year-and-a-half ago, cancer. She was on the protest. [Name 2] was buried about six months ago – cancer again – ex-protester. [Name 3] was buried three years ago – cancer-related – protestor. Also [Name 4, Name 5] ... [Name 5], while she was not on the protest nonetheless died of cancer. But one has to remember the asbestos at that particular time. So those are some of the names I have at the moment. Now, cancer-related illnesses at the moment amongst the women are [Name 6], as I said, who had taken the mini-stroke earlier on last week. She is on respite from breast cancer. [Name 7] from Belfast, who also has a cancer-related illness. And also, as I say, there has to be many other women who we have not contacted yet who are suffering these problems today. What I'm trying to say is, there has to be a correlation, a direct link, between the cleaning agents that were used in jail, and the asbestos ... Why these health problems? Why are so many of us dead from cancer?*

Recent research suggests links between powerful cleaning products and cancer, particularly breast cancer in women. Given the evidence gathered by the Panel, it is important that further research is conducted into illnesses and deaths associated with the conditions under which politically-affiliated prisoners were held, particularly those who participated in the protests.

As the months became years and years became decades, as part of the Conflict's legacy, the Peace Process was lauded by politicians and celebrated within communities. Some physical barriers that divide communities have been removed and powers have been devolved to a Northern Ireland Assembly that has stopped and started. Yet the psychological consequences of the Conflict have lived on, with many suffering in silence. While it was possible for some who survived the deprivations and inhumanity of the H-Blocks and Armagh to participate effectively in the transition from war to peace, for others it has been different. That is not a criticism, as all who



survived the degradation of incarceration have been harmed profoundly by their experiences. For those enduring PTSD, alcoholism or drug dependency, however, it has been a high price paid. Some have recovered, others have not.

While held in high regard within their communities, politically-affiliated prisoners regularly have found employment, post-release, difficult:

*I was out of work when I went for an interview. I went to the Employment Office and they said that there was a job going as a security man in the Employment Office. So, I applied for it and done the test and got it and then, all of a sudden, you have a security check to do and then they sent me back a letter to say, 'Sorry but no job. Security risk'.*

*... jobs in the security industry. And that could be door supervisors. It could be on building sites. It could be in film crews. They're the kind of jobs that a lot of former prisoners would have naturally gone into. ... What we found was the SIA [Security Industry Authority] was being run from England and they had no understanding around criminal convictions, and they had no understanding of the Good Friday Agreement ... Acceptance of political prisoners here should be treated differently from other applications for SIA badges.*

In addition to diminished work opportunities, women former prisoners report the imposition of excess payments in car and household insurance:

*It still continues. Until last year, I did not declare on my insurance that I was an ex-prisoner because if I had declared that, a lot of insurance companies won't insure you. It's down to them but only four companies will insure you. But the policies are much more expensive than what it would be just to get ordinary insurance. You know I could get ordinary insurance until last year when I put my daughter on my insurance. My insurance was maybe about four hundred pound and then I declared I was an ex-prisoner because they asked you this on the form ... and the insurance went up to one thousand eight hundred pounds. Everything is the same, even house insurance. If you declare that you were an ex-prisoner, the house insurance goes up as well.*

Asked if the long-term impact on their lives generated a desire for revenge a former prisoner reflected:

*No, absolutely not. I'd just like to sit and face them and ask them why they done it. You know, why did they beat? Why did they do it, you know, and the beatings and the severity of it and everything else, and why did they do what they done to me*

*with the pliers. You know what I mean? I'd just like to ask them why did they do that, you know? I know we were in a conflict situation, you know, but I don't think I could ever have done what they done to me. I could never do it to anybody.*

Another former prisoner agreed, commenting, 'I would like to think it wouldn't happen to anybody else. That would be the main thing'.

The extensive evidence gathered in interviews by the Panel clearly illustrates the immediate, short-term and long-term impact on those imprisoned, their families and their communities. PTSD is one consequence, there are others - psychological, physical, social, political and economic. The impact of inter-generational trauma is a further element in the transition from war to peace. What is remarkable, however, is the absence of rancour and hostility towards guards, governors and medical staff whose actions and inactions inflicted often severe physical pain and mental anguish. The primary objective of the interviewees was to place their experiences in the public domain - to be heard. It was their expressed, shared hope that a unique and expanding archive will be their legacy in the community and in wider society; that it will also inspire further research and understanding. For it was their resistance that pioneered political progress:

*It's just one part of the ongoing process through reconciliation and where does it go. Who's a victim? That's the whole question. They're saying obviously I was involved in A, B, C and D so I'm not a victim. That's what the British say. As regards individual prosecutions, it doesn't come into the equation as far as I am concerned. I think more important for me would be that we find out exactly the line of direction and where it came from. That the British accept that it was a policy-driven decision to create these conditions and it was basically their attempt to criminalise the whole political struggle and the weak link was the prisoners. That's what they seen us as, the weak link, and that's what they targeted as best they could. From that end of it, that's what I would be more interested finding out - are they prepared to admit what they did at a political level? And that's what they wanted to do as part of the war against what was going on at the time... Everybody knows the people who were there. Their names are well known in Nationalist areas for the brutality they done. There is a lot of them dead, a lot of them killed themselves. You write a list of, 'He did this and he did that'. We can do that. I can give you the names of people here, the brutality of some of them was just unreal. Perversion, brutality, like sticking their finger up your ass. That was going*

*on with hundreds of people. But I would be more interested in finding out the whole direction.*

Regarding core issues, former prisoners emphasized the importance of uncovering what they identified as the ‘clear link between collusion with their [State] agents and the Loyalist death squads and whatever policy they had towards Republican prisoners’.

Throughout three decades of armed conflict the UK Government normalised Special Powers, suspended Due Process, deployed the Military and legitimised the violence of incarceration. Each constituent element, culminating in the death of ten men on hunger strike, failed to break the collective will of Catholic/ Nationalist/ Republican communities. Taken together, they underpinned the consolidation of a collective political consciousness that formed the foundation underpinning negotiated progress towards a united Ireland. That strength of will has remained undiminished, as a former woman prisoner stated:

*You know, we were prisoners of war and should have been treated like that. And we were all very, very proud, extremely proud, you know. No matter what happened, whether it was a beating or whatever, the next day you walked out with your shoulders and head up as if ‘you did nothing to me’, you know. And we would never ever let them, you know, see that it had touched you.*

Yet, as another woman stated, that resilience is accompanied by lasting anger:

*We lost political status in March 1976 ... After that was when we refused to work. We refused to work because, basically, we would not accept being criminals. There is absolutely no generation of my family that have ever been a criminal and that includes me. And I very much was not going to be labelled a criminal, as I had never carried out any criminal act in my life. I still feel very, very angry at the British Government because of their occupation of this country, because of how they terrorised and beat and slaughtered people in this country. I was twelve years old when the Ballymurphy Massacre occurred, and I remember at that time shots being fired through my mother’s house and she was a widow woman with ten children. I remember looking out of the window and I saw people just being shot and falling. Absolutely, I am angry still at the occupation and I remain angry at the way the prison officers and the British Government allowed the treatment in the prisons against the women. I am fifty-six now and I remain still angry. I am a proud Republican and I have no regrets about it, but I still remain very angry at the British occupation and British treatment of the prisoners.*

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# APPENDICES

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## APPENDIX 1 - PANEL AND WITNESSES

### The Panel

*Warren Allmand* (Chair)

Former Canadian Liberal MP; Cabinet Member 1972-1979 including Solicitor General; tabled the 1976 Bill to abolish the death penalty in Canada.

*John Burton MB*, LL.M.

Former GP focusing on family medicine; completed primary law BLegSc and Masters in Law at Queen's University; civil and human rights specialist.

*Richard Harvey* Barrister-at-Law, Garden Court Chambers, London.

Called to the Bar in London, New York and The Hague; Counsel at The Saville Inquiry.

### Solicitor to the Panel

Pádraig Ó Muirigh

### Coiste na n-Iarchimí

Séanna Walsh

### Blanket Protest Witnesses

Paddy Agnew  
Joseph Black  
Bernadette Boyle  
James Connolly Brady  
Seamus Brown  
Tony Brown  
Kevin Campbell  
Gerard Clarke  
John Connolly  
Brendan Connolly  
Hugh Joseph Corey  
Robert Corrigan  
Cathal Crumley  
Michael Culbert  
Henry Cushnihan  
Eamon Digney  
Frankie Doherty  
Marie Doherty  
Robert Doherty  
Manuel Donaghy  
Seamus Finucane  
Brendan Flynn  
Margaret Friel RIP  
Gerard Fusco  
Maureen Gibson RIP  
Kevin E Henry  
Anthony Hughes  
John Hunter  
Seamus Kearney

Seamus Kelly  
Patrick Livingstone  
Thomas Loudon  
Donncha MacNiallais  
Una Mahon  
Hugh Malone  
Gerard Martin RIP  
Robert McCallum  
Francis McCann  
Jim McCann  
James McCoubrey  
Marcus McChrystal  
Robert McClenaghan  
Mary McColgan  
Gerard McConville  
Terry McCullough  
Gerry McDonnell  
Maurice McDowell  
Jim McElvenna  
Sean McGerrigan  
Paul McGlinchey  
Ciaran McGillicuddy  
Paddy McGrandles  
Mary McKenna  
Paul McKenna  
Laurence McKeown  
Pauline McLaughlin  
Pius McNaught  
James McNeil

Ultan McNulty  
Sean McPeake  
Sean McVeigh RIP  
Michael McVey  
Tony Miller  
Ian Milne  
Martin Molloy  
Gerry Moore  
Lynn O'Connell  
Eilis O'Connor RIP  
Rory O'Connor  
Seamus O'Connor  
Eamonn O'Donnell  
Antoine O'Feargail  
Kevin O'Neill  
Pilib Ó Ruanaí  
Anne Marie Quinn  
Jimmy Quinn  
Paddy Quinn  
Colm Scullion  
Gerard Scullion  
Séamus Soal  
Freddie Toal  
Patricia Torney  
Lewis Watson  
Liam Whelan  
Peadar Whelan  
Francie Wilson

As noted above five former prisoners who gave evidence to the Panel have died. The Panel and all associated with its work offer their condolences to their families and friends.

The Panel also thanks all who were interviewed in the course of its work.

### **Additional Research**

Glenn McGarrigle LLB Hons, LLM

### **Video and Audio Recordings**

Bill Tierney

### **Report Editor**

Phil Scraton PhD, DLaws (Hon), DPhil (Hon), MA, BA (Hons)  
Professor Emeritus, School of Law, Queen's University, Belfast

## APPENDIX 2 - TIMELINE

<b>August 1971</b>	Introduction of Internment Without Trial
<b>May 1972</b>	Hunger Strike in Crumlin Road and Armagh Prisons for Political Status; it lasted 35 days and ended with granting of 'Special Category Status'
<b>August 1973</b>	Introduction of Diplock, 'No Jury' Courts
<b>October 1974</b>	Burning of Long Kesh triggered by threats from a guard to target a prisoner's wife
<b>January 1975</b>	The Gardiner Report, advocating the end of 'Internment Without Trial', the ending of 'Special Category (Political) Status' and changes in the physical structure of Long Kesh/ HMP The Maze Prison from Nissen Huts to cellular accommodation
<b>Summer 1975</b>	Construction of H-Blocks begins
<b>November 1975</b>	Last internees released
<b>March 1976</b>	End of 'Special Category (Political) Status' for all charged after this date
<b>April 1976</b>	First of 19 prison officials shot dead, the majority by the IRA
<b>September 1976</b>	First Republican Prisoner refuses to wear the prison uniform; 'Blanket Protest' begins
<b>December 1976</b>	First Woman Republican Prisoner begins 'No Work Protest' in Armagh Gaol
<b>March 1977</b>	Prisoners begin 'Blanket Protest' in Crumlin Rd Prison
<b>March 1978</b>	No-Wash Protest' begins in the H-Blocks as a consequence of increased assaults and searches by guards while prisoners were conducting ablutions
<b>July 1978</b>	Visit by Cardinal Ó Fiaich followed by his ground-breaking statement raising public international awareness about conditions in the prisons
<b>Summer 1978</b>	Escalation in prison guards' brutality and assaults on protesting prisoners; introduction of table and mirror searches; use of toxic disinfectant and cleaning chemicals
<b>Autumn 1978</b>	Prison Authorities initiate forced washing of prisoners who resist and are severely beaten; forced washes continues for several weeks in H3 and H4
<b>February 1979</b>	Removal of prisoners' leadership to H-Block 6 followed by intense assaults on prisoners in H3, H4 and H5
<b>September 1979</b>	Return of prisoners from H-Block 6
<b>March 1980</b>	Beginning of negotiations between Cardinal Ó'Fiaich and Northern Ireland Office officials to end the protest
<b>September 1980</b>	Collapse of Cardinal Ó'Fiaich talks
<b>27th October 1980</b>	Seven H-Block prisoners begin Hunger Strike; joined 1st December by three Armagh women prisoners

<b>18th December 1980</b>	End of Hunger Strike but refusal by the Northern Ireland Office to adopt a flexible approach results in further conflict and lays the ground for another Hunger Strike
<b>March 1981</b>	Beginning of second Hunger Strike and death of ten prisoners
<b>October 1981</b>	End of the Hunger Strike and granting of substantial concessions
<b>October 1982</b>	End of all protest by Republican Prisoners in the H-Blocks; a level of protest continued in Armagh and later Magilligan as a Government policy seeking to integrate Loyalists and Republicans was imposed



## **APPENDIX 3 - THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

The background research underpinning the Panel focused on publications and official documents. Documentary sources held at Kew Gardens were accessed for the research. The collection is incomplete yet, as this Report demonstrates, sufficient material exists to establish that the Prison Service was ‘politicised’ and the removal of Special Category Status was not at the behest of ‘those responsible for prison administration’. Rather, ‘it was a major political decision’. Further documents demonstrate that a ‘contingency plan’ was drafted ‘to anticipate changes in prison population’ and a ‘change in tactics’ would be required to ensure there should be no ‘softening’ of the regime. This hard-line approach that ‘something should be done to put more pressure on the protestors to abandon their protest’ consolidated in 1979.

Central to the research, however, are testimonies given by seventy-seven men and women who participated in the research. Interviews were held in Belfast, Derry, Gulladuff and Newry, South Armagh. This Report draws on transcribed oral statements of thirty-four Republican blanket protestors, two Loyalist prisoners, former prison governors, medical practitioners including a consultant psychiatrist, lawyers and academics.

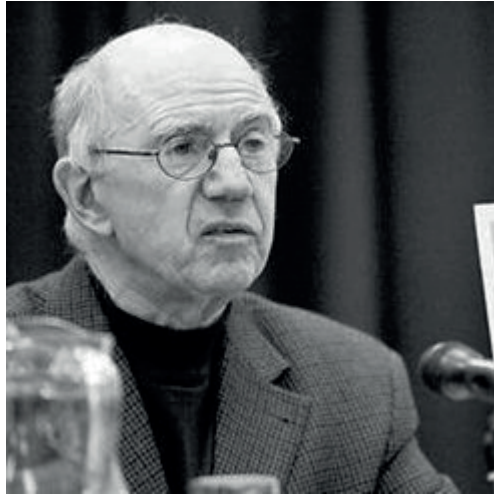
With permission of the contributors, evidence gathered by the Panel will be archived in its entirety and publicly made available.

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**IN MEMORIAM**  
**WARREN WILLIAM ALLMAND PC, OC, QC**  
BORN 19TH SEPTEMBER 1932, DIED 7TH DECEMBER 2016



An international human rights activist, Warren Allmand was a Canadian Liberal Party MP from 1965 to 1997. He held three Cabinet posts: Solicitor General (1972–1976), Indian Affairs and Northern Development (1976–1977) and Consumer and Corporate Affairs (1977–1979).

As Solicitor General, in 1976 he tabled the bill to abolish the death penalty in Canada, announcing the first Correctional Investigator for federally sentenced prisoners. He presented three Private Members' Bills, revising the Citizenship Oath and deleting reference to the Queen.

After retiring from political life, Warren Allmand became a full-time human rights activist. From 1997 to 2002 he served as President of the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development and International President of Parliamentarians for Global Action. In 2004 he was elected President of the World Federalist Movement–Canada. He was also a member of: Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East; the International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group; CANADEM; and the Kairos Indigenous Rights Committee.

Between 2003 and 2013 Warren taught international human rights at McGill University, and was Visiting Scholar at the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada. In 2011 he endorsed the Canadian Boat to Gaza, part of the Freedom Flotilla that aims to end the Israeli blockade imposed on the 1.6 million Palestinian civilians who live in the Gaza Strip.

Warren first visited the North in 1970 as a member of a Canadian parliamentary delegation. He returned in 1995 as Chair of the House of Commons Justice Committee within an independent Canadian fact-finding delegation in support of the Peace Process. He was an International Observer at controversial marches on the Garvaghy Road and Lower Ormeau Road each July 1997-2000. He was an active member of Montreal's Coalition for Peace in Ireland where he met Rose Nolan. They married in 2002.

In 2015 he chaired the Independent Panel of Inquiry into the circumstances of the H-Block and Armagh Prison Protests 1976-1981.

In February 2016 Warren was diagnosed with a brain tumour. He died on the 7th December 2016, aged 84. He is survived by his wife, two daughters and a son.









**Torture: an aggravated and deliberate form  
of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment  
or punishment.**

**UN General Assembly, December 1975**

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*‘What struck me most on reading this Report was how seemingly highly cultured government officials and civil servants, when faced with extremities of conscience and courage, could impose extremities of harsh, brutalising control, because to show even the tiniest bit of human compassion would be seen as weak. The bodies and minds that were damaged were those of the prisoners; the spirit that was broken was the spirit of fairness, justice and humanity of those who wrote the policies and insisted on the regime.’*

**Justice Albie Sachs**  
**Constitutional Court Judge (Retd), South Africa**

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*‘The importance of this work, which highlights the torture and humiliation suffered by the women and men in Armagh Jail and Long Kesh, is of great historical significance. Their stories confirm to the world that these were people who were totally committed to a political goal and their sacrifices have contributed to the peace process in this country’.*

**Senator/Seanadóir Frances Black**  
**Seanad Éireann/ Senate of Ireland**

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*‘Chaired by the indomitable, late Warren Allmand, the Independent Panel emerges with a report that provides a welcome and much needed beacon of light, exposing in meticulous and often painful detail the manner in which state power and authority resulted in horrendous abuses of power and torture by those who exercise control over their conditions of confinement ... chronicling a shameful period of Ireland’s past. The international community must ensure the vital importance of independent, transparent and rigorous oversight, as well as access to timely, effective and transformative measures to remedy the ongoing wrongs this report lays bare.’*

**The Honourable Kim Pate, C.M.**  
**Senator for Ontario, Senate of Canada**

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