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Irregular Use of Plastic Bullets in Northern Ireland

The 25 grain plastic VC baton round (plastic bullet) currently used in Northern Ireland is a cylinder measuring $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches long and $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter and weighs 135 grms. It is fitted into a cartridge with a small gunpowder charge and is fired from a gun.

The plastic bullet was first issued to the security forces in Northern Ireland in August 1972 but was not used in action until February 1973. It replaced the rubber bullet, which was introduced in Northern Ireland in July 1970 and withdrawn in 1975. Both bullets (baton rounds) derive from the wooden "broomstick" rounds used by the Hong Kong police in riots in 1967.

Deaths and injuries

The following statistics illustrate the scale of the deaths and serious injuries arising from their use:

- Since 1972 fourteen people have been killed by rubber (3) and plastic (11) bullets (see list attached). The last person killed was Stephen McConomy (aged 11) on 19 April 1982.
- Seven of those killed were children between ten and fifteen years.
- There have been hundreds of injuries, including blindness and brain damage.

A report published in the British Journal of Surgeons in 1975 based on an examination of 90 Belfast victims of rubber bullets between 1970-1972 listed one death, two cases of total blindness, seven blindness in one eye, five of severe loss of vision, four of facial disfigurement.

- A further study was carried out by surgeons of 100 people between April and August 1981. Speaking in the Irish Medical Times in May 1982, Dr Lawrence Roche said that the broad result of the study "would seem to indicate that plastic bullets are not safer than rubber bullets".

Dr Roche also said that of the eleven victims who died from plastic bullets, three were hit in the chest, one in the face and seven in the head. The last figure is significant when contrasted with the "Rule of Engagement for PVC Baton Rounds" issued to the British Army which states that the Rounds should be aimed so that they strike the lower part of the body directly.

A further point of serious concern is the number of occasions they have been used in non-riot situations and where the injured persons appear not to have been involved in rioting.

Concern regarding use of plastic bullets

Two International Tribunals of Inquiry into deaths and injuries from plastic bullets in Northern Ireland have been organised by the Association for Legal Justice, one in August 1981 and the second in October 1982. On the basis of the evidence presented to it the first tribunal concluded that the plastic bullet was a lethal weapon and that there appeared to have been widespread indiscriminate shooting by plastic bullets of people not involved in riots in the period May-June 1981. The 1981 Tribunal called for a ban on the use of plastic bullets in Northern Ireland and for urgent inquiries by the Northern Ireland authorities into the deaths and serious injuries caused by plastic bullets.

The findings made in October 1982 were similar to those made by the Tribunal in 1981. In addition, the Tribunal was very critical of the legal profession for not pursuing with sufficient vigour the legal remedies which are available.

The British Home Secretary said on 10 July 1981, following riots in Manchester and Liverpool, that he "would deeply regret their introduction because they are lethal". On 15 July 1981, however, in the House of Commons the Home Secretary said that plastic bullets would be available to police Chief Officers in Britain in the very last resort and under strict control.

In October 1982 at their conference in Blackpool the Labour Party voted for a ban on the use of plastic bullets in Northern Ireland. However, Mr Don Concannon, opposition spokesman on Northern Ireland, said they would not be banned unless there was a suitable replacement. Speaking on Radio Éireann, Mr Denis Healy M.P. said there was evidence that plastic bullets had been misused in Northern Ireland and there was a lot of evidence that the plastic bullet is a very unsuitable weapon.

The British Liberal Party has also called for a ban on the use of plastic bullets. In May of this year the European Parliament passed four resolutions calling for a ban on the use of plastic bullets.

Raising the matter with the British authorities

The British authorities have been approached on a number of occasions about the irregular use of plastic bullets. In making these representations we have detailed the following main aspects:

- use in situations where there is no rioting,
- firing at close range,
- firing in circumstances where aiming is impossible,
- aiming too high,
- lack of disciplinary action against security force personnel who misuse the weapon.

The British were approached on this subject at Ministerial level in September 1981 and November 1981. Approaches were also made at official level in September 1981 and May 1982. The most recent approaches at official level were made in October 1982 and January 1983.

British response

The main thrust of the British response has been to say that, while regretting the deaths and injuries caused, there was no alternative available and the ferocity of the attacks on the security forces was often underestimated. They also claim the number of complaints about misuse of plastic bullets are small compared to the number fired.

Comment on British response

The members of the minority community are in an invidious position regarding complaints against the security forces.

If they make complaints they are in every danger of being arrested. Also the British will offer compensation to relations of victims only if they agree to sign away all their legal rights.

Department of Foreign Affairs

28 January 1983

List of people killed by plastic bullets

	<u>Name (Age)</u>	<u>Date of fatality</u>
1.	Stephen Geddis (10)	30/8/1975
2.	Brian Stewart (13)	10/10/1976
3.	Michael Donnelly (20)	9/8/1980
4.	Paul Whitters (15)	25/10/1980
5.	Julie Livingstone (14)	13/5/1981
6.	Carol Anne Kelly (12)	22/5/1981
7.	Henry Duffy (42)	22/5/1981
8.	Nora McCabe (30)	9/7/1981
9.	Peter Doherty (39)	31/7/1981
10.	Peter Maginnis (41)	9/8/1981
11.	Stephen McConomy (11)	19/4/1981