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PLAND

KILLINGS BY SECURITY FORCES IN WEST BELFAST

STATEMENT BY BISHOP CAHAL B. DALY
of Down and Connor

17th January 1990, 10.00 a.m.

On last Saturday morning in West Belfast a shocked community were witness to a perilous blurring of the distinction between the methods used by security forces to uphold the law and the methods used by organised crime or by paramilitaries to break the law. An indispensable precondition for the establishment of peace in this society is the process of building community confidence in the security forces. This process was already bound to be slow and laborious and difficult, but it has received a cruel setback through the shooting dead of three men by British Army personnel on the Falls Road on last Saturday morning, and by the ferocity with which the shooting would seem to have been carried out.

The men were engaged in criminal activity. At least two of them were carrying replica guns, very closely resembling real and deadly weapons. They were wearing paramilitary-style balaclavas. They could have been mistaken for paramilitaries. Nevertheless, no attempt seems to have been made to apprehend them or even to challenge them. The driver of the getaway car was apparently unarmed, and yet seems to have been shot dead without challenge.

It is hard to see how the whole posture and activity of the military personnel involved in this incident can be reconciled with a policy of combatting paramilitary violence strictly within the rule of law and under the primacy of the police.

INDEPENDENT ENQUIRY

It is vital and it is urgent that a rigorous enquiry be conducted into the whole circumstances of this lamentable episode, and into the policy decisions which lie behind it and which made it possible. Given the huge credibility problem which already hangs over the security forces in West Belfast, a merely internal investigation stands very little chance of carrying conviction. An independent public enquiry, under a respected and impartial chairman, would be in the interests of the community and even in the true interests of the security forces themselves.

The incident has aroused grave and widespread concern, and not just within the Catholic community. Among those who have expressed the greatest concern are people who have spoken the most consistently and worked the hardest against republican or loyalist paramilitary violence, but who now, with dismay, see their efforts sabotaged by this operation.

It is essential that it be established under what instructions the soldiers were operating, whether they used only reasonable force, and whether they acted in conformity with the official rules of engagement.

SECURITY POLICY

This however is not enough. Soldiers are presumed to be carrying out orders and following guidelines handed down by superior officers and indeed they are presumed to be implementing official Army policy. It is the Army authorities who, with the approval of the Government, draw up the orders and who formulate the policy and it is they who have to be challenged to state what that policy now is. It is their responsibility to ensure that the stated policy is in all cases strictly enforced. The British Government itself must be challenged to clarify its directives governing the relations between the RUC and the Army, and to state what is now the policy and what is the reality regarding the primacy of the police force in our present situation.

The present episode cannot be taken out of the context of a whole series of security force operations which strongly resemble last Saturday's events. The shooting of UVF man, Brian Robinson, on the Crumlin Road last September, equally aroused serious questions as to what precisely is the British Army's policy and what are the instructions given to undercover soldiers in situations of real or suspected paramilitary activity. On the occasion of that shooting, I deplored the victim's death and I said:

"While effective action by the security forces is imperative, it is no less necessary that this activity be always within the constraints of the law, and be strictly in accordance with the principle of minimum force. After twenty years of death and mutilation and destruction through violence, our society needs to recover its respect for the principle of the absolute sacredness of all human life. The security forces have a primary duty to respect this principle themselves and thus to give an example to the whole of society."

On last Saturday, members of the security forces gave society a flagrant counter-example to respect for the absolute sacredness of all human life.

SECURITY REVIEW

Good could come out of this tragic affair if it were to lead to a radical reappraisal of security policy as a whole. Security operations must unquestionably include a military aspect. Yet military measures alone will never bring an end to paramilitary violence. What look in the short term like military successes can in the longer term defeat their purposes and bring instead a positive gain to the paramilitaries.

The military aspect of security must always be evaluated in the light of the paramount objective of building up community confidence in the security forces. The deployment, the attitudes, gestures, language and behaviour of soldiers on the streets must be judged by these same standards, and not solely by the criterion of supposed military efficacy. Above all, the military aspect of security must be seen as only one segment of a comprehensive security policy. An integral security policy would be one which gives as much weight to social and economic and environmental and human and community factors as to military ones. It would be one which identifies the underlying causes of civil unrest and violence, namely alienation, deprivation, injustice and inequality, and systematically addresses these with as much vigour as it does the military factors.

SYMPATHY FOR RELATIVES

Eddie Hale, Peter Thompson and John McNeill were casualties of society and of a violent environment before becoming casualties of Army gunfire. Despite their faults, they had good and lovable qualities. They needed compassion and love and help which society often did not offer them. One of them had already, three years ago, been the victim of an IRA "punishment shooting" which sent bullets through each ankle, each knee and each elbow - a form of barbarism which could not but incite him to a still greater sense of rejection and alienation from society. May the Father who embraces the Prodigal Son show them a mercy and compassion which society refused them. I offer deep sympathy to their relatives and friends and pray that the Lord may comfort them.