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Northern Ireland: Amnesty International delegation says human rights protection should be universal

An Amnesty International delegation examining the human rights situation in Northern Ireland this week said it had urged political leaders, police representatives and government officials to make human rights protection a universal rather than a sectarian issue.

“The Multi-Party Agreement puts human rights at the heart of a just and lasting peace,” the delegation said, “but real action is needed to fulfil its promise.”

The delegation also said it had been shocked and moved by evidence that an enormous number of past and present abuses remain unresolved and are not being adequately addressed.

The four Amnesty International delegates, who visited Northern Ireland from 7 to 14 May, spent three days talking to those involved in the stand-off in Portadown.

“Portadown is a microcosm of the larger conflict and reflects virtually all the human rights issues at its heart,” said Dr William Schulz, Executive Director of Amnesty International in the USA, and head of the delegation.

However, the delegation could identify signs of hope resulting from the human rights commitments contained in last year’s peace agreement, including a newly-created Human Rights Commission which has started work to draft a Bill of Rights and promote human rights for all people in Northern Ireland.

The delegation also welcomed the major reviews now under way into Northern Ireland’s police and criminal justice system, as well as an inquiry into the 1972 “Bloody Sunday” massacre.

“The decision this week by Northern Ireland’s Law Society to call for independent investigations into the murders of solicitors Pat Finucane and Rosemary Nelson marked a historic step forward in the impartial defence of human rights in Northern Ireland,” Dr Schulz said.

“It is hard not to see the scandalous attack on Pat Finucane this week by former Chief Constable John Hermon as an attempt to dissuade the Law Society from taking this decision.”

The Amnesty International delegates also said suspects interrogated under emergency laws were now better protected as a result of all interviews being audio and video taped, although the best protection would be for their lawyers to be present as elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

“We heard testimony from people from different parts of the community which described unlawful arrests, alleged unprovoked beatings, sectarian and racist abuse by police officers and serious injuries caused by plastic bullets,” the delegation said.

“We heard testimony from the families of people who had been victims of punishment beatings and shootings by paramilitary groups. We also talked to a number of community restorative justice programmes which are working to circumvent this cycle of abuse.”

The delegation will be reporting its findings to the UK government, government and police authorities in Northern Ireland and the government of the Republic of Ireland.

“We want all the parties to the Multi-Party Agreement to implement in full the human rights aspect of the agreement,” Dr Schulz said. “There is no need to wait for our report. Those responsible for these abuses know that they are taking place, they know that we condemn them unreservedly and know that they owe it to the people of Northern Ireland to halt them immediately.”

The delegation’s recommendations to the governments will include calls for:

- the repeal of emergency measures which contravene international human rights standards;
- an overhaul of police and security force practices to eliminate human rights abuses;
- the protection of lawyers and others from threats and intimidation;
- an independent inquiry into the murder of human rights lawyer Pat Finucane;
- a genuinely independent inquiry into the murder of human rights lawyer Rosemary Nelson;
- an independent investigation into the death of Robert Hamill;
- a process open to all members of the community to acknowledge the legacy of abuses throughout the conflict and provide mechanisms for investigation, justice and redress in individual cases;
- full cooperation with and significant resources for the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

The delegation said that Amnesty International will continue to call on all paramilitary organizations to end abuses such as arbitrary detentions, torture and murder.

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Note to editors: There will be an Amnesty International news conference at 9.45 Friday 14 May 1999 at the Europa Hotel, Belfast. To arrange interviews, please contact Richard Reoch on 0498 555 594.