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United Kingdom: Escalating sectarian violence must be addressed

Amnesty International is alarmed by the escalating level of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland in recent weeks and urges the government, police, political and community leaders to take action to address the increasing violence which is resulting in grave human rights abuses.

In yet a further exacerbation of the situation, a 20-year-old Catholic postal worker, Daniel McColgan, was killed by the Loyalist armed group, the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). He was shot by two masked men as he arrived for work at a postal depot at Rathcoole, on the outskirts of north Belfast, in the early hours of Saturday 12 January 2002. He leaves a partner and a 13-month-old daughter. The killing followed a pipe bomb attack by the Loyalist Red Hand Defenders, a cover name for the UDA and the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF), on the home of a prison officer, injuring a mother and child.

The killing of Daniel McColgan came after days of intensive rioting by both Loyalists and Republicans in the Ardoyne area of north Belfast, during which police came under violent attack and 80 officers were reportedly injured; many people suffered injuries and were subjected to verbal abuse, three Catholics were reportedly injured with shot gun pellets reportedly fired by Loyalists and at least two people were reportedly injured by plastic bullets fired by police. A spark for the recent wave of violence was an incident at Holy Cross Girl's Primary School -- a Catholic school situated in a predominantly Protestant area -- on 9 January, when pupils were prevented from leaving the building by protesters at the school gates. They were able to leave the school by bus after security forces arrived. Loyalist residents of the area had

previously staged a four-month picket of the road to the school; during this time, young schoolgirls were escorted by adults through police lines to the school, while protesters shouted verbal abuse and violence frequently broke out; the protest ended in November 2001.

The confrontation between members of the loyalist and nationalist communities spread to other schools in the area, both Protestant and Catholic. It was reported that a group of Loyalists, one of whom was armed with a gun, entered the grounds of Our Lady of Mercy Catholic girls' secondary school, smashing 18 cars with crowbars on the morning of 10 January. That afternoon police used armoured Land Rovers to ferry Protestant secondary pupils past a flashpoint zone.

Amnesty International was also concerned that earlier this week, the Red Hand Defenders issued threats against teachers and other staff at Catholic schools and against Catholic postal workers in north Belfast as "legitimate targets". The threats have now reportedly been rescinded.

This month's violence in Northern Ireland comes after an alarming increase in all forms of violence, including sectarian violence, in 2001. A recent research study, by Dr. Peter Shirlow of the University of Ulster, found that sectarian hatred had reached unprecedented levels in north Belfast. The vast majority of the approximately 80 pipe-bomb attacks in Belfast in 2001 took place in north Belfast. Other areas targeted include Coleraine in Co. Derry and Larne in Co. Antrim. At least 19 people reportedly died during 2001 as a result of sectarian or paramilitary activity, of whom 14 were killed by Loyalists and five by Republicans. These included the killings by the Red Hand Defenders of a journalist, Martin O'Hagan, and a former UDA member and Special Branch informer, William Stobie.

According to reported figures of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, there were 187 "punishment" shootings and 144 "punishment" beatings, i.e. attacks carried out by members of paramilitary groups of members of their own communities, recorded during 2001. Of the shootings, 121 were reportedly by Loyalists and 66 by Republicans, and of the beatings, 91 were allegedly by Loyalists and 53 by Republicans.