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UK: Bloody Sunday inquiry vindicates the innocence of victims

On Sunday 30 January 1972, known as Bloody Sunday, 13 civil rights marchers were shot dead and 14 others were wounded, including one person who subsequently died, by British soldiers in Northern Ireland. Over 38 years later, on 15 June 2010, the Bloody Sunday inquiry, chaired by the Law Lord, Lord Saville of Newdigate, published its findings into the events of that day.

The inquiry concluded that none of those killed or injured that day bear any responsibility for the shootings; all of them were innocent. It found that none of those shot at was “posing a threat of causing death or serious injury”, none of them was armed with a firearm and “no-one threw or threatened to throw a nail or petrol bomb at soldiers on Bloody Sunday”.

The report confirms that several victims were shot in the back whilst running away, in one case a victim was shot for “the second time in the back, probably as he lay mortally wounded”. Another victim was injured when he was tending to his dead or dying son and another was shot in the head and killed instantly, whilst moving out from behind cover “as he was waving a piece of cloth”.

The report concluded that, with very limited exceptions, soldiers aimed at people they knew did not pose a threat of causing death or serious injury and on most occasions they “did not fire in fear and panic”. The inquiry found that the accounts put forward by many of the soldiers in order to justify their firing, in which they claimed to have shot at gunmen or bombers, were manifestly and knowingly untrue. Criticisms were also made of operational military decisions by Major General Ford and Lieutenant Colonel Wilford.

The deaths and injury caused by British soldiers that day were, therefore, “unjustified” and “unjustifiable”. In response to these findings the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, gave a public state apology for the conduct of the armed forces that day stating that the inquiry’s findings were absolutely clear and that what happened on Bloody Sunday was wrong.

The publication of the report has also firmly discredited the original 1972 Tribunal of Inquiry into the events of Bloody Sunday, chaired by Lord Widgery. The Widgery inquiry was fundamentally flawed, following, amongst other reasons, inconsistencies in the report, failure to collect all the relevant evidence including not interviewing all those injured that day, inaccurately interpreting forensic reports and not investigating all aspects of the day.

The right of the victims and their families to know the truth about what happened on Bloody Sunday is fundamental in securing their right to a remedy; the publication of the report of Saville inquiry has finally allowed for that to happen. However, the right to a remedy, as enshrined in international human rights law, also includes the obligation upon states, where appropriate, to bring prosecutions against those responsible for violations. The report of the inquiry makes it clear that the deaths on Bloody Sunday were unjustified and accordingly accountability for any unlawful actions by state agents will need to be ensured.

Calls continue for the UK government to ensure that all human rights abuses committed in Northern Ireland are impartially, independently and effectively investigated. The UK

government should address the proposals in the Eames Bradley report forthwith, in order to deal with outstanding abuses in Northern Ireland's past.

The right of victims and their families to full and public disclosure of the truth about the human rights abuses that they have suffered and the duty of states to hold those responsible to account are essential in ensuring that justice is achieved and that state and non-state actors cannot commit such abuses with impunity.

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