

SIR PATRICK MAYHEW

STATEMENT: 15 JULY 1996

With permission, Madam Speaker, I will make a statement about the events of the past 10 days in Northern Ireland.

Throughout this period massive and completely unacceptable civil disorder has occurred, on both sides of the community, totally wrongful in character and unjust in its consequences for all its victims.

In the course of this period two men have tragically lost their lives.

The RUC have been stretched to the limit of their ability to maintain order and preserve life.

Violent manifestations of sectarian antagonism have occurred.

Intimidation, including intimidation of RUC officers and their families, has been rife. The Killyhevin Hotel at Enniskillen has been gravely damaged by a bomb, with many people shocked and injured.

All this represents, without doubt, the worst set-back for many years: a return towards what so many people in Northern Ireland, and far beyond, had prayed was over for good. This has been a black period for Northern Ireland, with deep fears and anxieties generated on all sides. Trust and confidence have suffered greatly.

In this statement I will examine briefly with the House what has happened, and what the way forward from here now should be.

At the outset, however, I wish to say three things.

First, I warmly commend, as I think the whole House will, the maintenance by the Loyalist paramilitary organisations of their ceasefire. It is of critical importance that this should be sustained.

Secondly, if the people of Northern Ireland are to be helped to move back from the abyss, and move forward to a better future, then all of us who claim a right to speak on these matters must seek to be objective and fair. To seize on what is no more than a partisan perception, and to proclaim it as an established truth without examination, is immensely dangerous and damaging.

Lastly, I want to say that the scene, grave though it undoubtedly is, does have a crucially positive element.

We have in place a democratic process of political talks, for which a large majority of the electorate has voted. I shall return to this, and to its paramount importance.

Sir Hugh Annesley, the Chief Constable, yesterday gave an extensive interview to the BBC. He described the background to these events, and the events themselves. I have placed a transcript of that interview in the library. I commend it strongly to the House. It sets out the facts.

Unprecedented efforts had been made by the Government, by Church leaders, by the RUC, and by others, to secure an accommodation at Portadown.

The Chief Constable makes it clear that ever since January he personally, and his Deputy Chief Constable Mr Flanagan, had tried with both sides at Portadown to negotiate a compromise.

I pay special tribute to the entirely independent efforts of the Church Leaders, who strove for two days and two nights to bring the two sides together, sadly without achieving success.

The Chief Constable is required by law to consider the likelihood of serious disorder if a notified march proceeds.

He has to make an operational, professional and impartial judgement.

That judgement, under our clearly established constitutional arrangements, is for him alone.

On Thursday 6 July the Chief Constable had duly decided to order that the return stage of the Orange Order Parade at Portadown, to take place the following day, should be re-routed away from the Garvaghy Road.

A lawful order was accordingly made to that effect. That decision was made because he anticipated serious organised disorder, not limited to Portadown protesters, if the intended return stage of the march went ahead. A counter march planned by the Garvaghy Road residents also had restrictions placed upon it, though, in the event, it did not take place.

I wish to make it clear that in taking that operational decision at that time and in those circumstances the Chief Constable had, and retains, the full support of the Government.

Over the next four days there occurred serious disorder both at Drumcree and in many other parts of the Province. There was a clear and reprehensible intention to over-stretch the capacity of the RUC to maintain public order.

At Drumcree itself the Chief Constable has said, in his own language, that the most insidious, despicable and disgusting threats to his officers in the front line were made, to the effect that their wives or families would be got at. Elsewhere the RUC were fiercely engaged. There was intimidation of their families and other civilians, with widespread blocking of roads and attacks upon property.

The RUC, with full support from the Army, did its duty with great resolution in responding to this critical situation.

At the request of the Chief Constable, two further battalions were brought into the Province in support of his Force.

However, despite the sustained efforts to which I have referred, it proved impossible for the two sides within the local community at Drumcree to reach an agreement.

On the morning of 11 July, after considering a number of options, and having awaited the outcome of the ongoing attempts at mediation, the Chief Constable decided that a limited parade down the Garvaghy Road was the option most likely to prevent loss of life.

He has made clear that it was foreseeable that by the night of the 11 July some 60,000 to 70,000 Orange Marchers would be invited by the Orange Order to converge on Drumcree. And an attempt had already been made to get through the fence.

In that event he foresaw that they would overrun the wire, obliging the police and the military to withdraw and to attempt to protect the Garvaghy Road Estate.

He concluded that there would be serious risk of lives being lost, including on the Carvaghy Estate, and he has said that he would not in any circumstances have "traded one life for the Garvaghy Road".

In that decision also the Chief Constable has the full support of the Government. We also share his regret at what the Chief Constable has described as "an outrageous attempt by one side to impose their will on the other by the sheer weight of force."

I recognise, of course, that the nationalist community, or many of them, are bitterly critical of this decision. But it was taken very much with the safety of the Garvaghy Road residents in mind.

I am in no doubt, however, that under the circumstances, it was the right one. The violence which followed in many nationalist areas was no more justified or acceptable than that fomented by loyalists earlier in the week.

Once again, the Security Forces came under intense attack, from gun fire as well as petrol bombs and other missiles.

The police have responded proportionately and with great courage and professionalism to these attacks.

The police investigation into the bomb attack on the Killyhevlin Motel is now underway.

While it is too early to say which organisation was responsible, it seems clear that preparations for this attack began well before the events of Drumcree.

These events surrounding Drumcree, and those surrounding the march on the Lower Ormeau Road in Belfast on the 12 July, have underscored the potential destabilising effect of controversial parades. There are no immediately obvious answers. "My Rt Hon Friend the Minister of State the Member for Westminster North has over many months been seeking to help the avoidance of conflict in this year's Marching Season. As I said in the House last week I now have in mind a general review that will make recommendations about the better management of future controversial parades.

I therefore confirm today that the Government intends to establish a review based on evidence which any interested party will be free to

submit. I envisage that the review would examine the current arrangements for handling parades and marches in Northern Ireland.

I shall announce later further details of the review including the name of the Chairman and detailed terms of reference.

Recent events are however but a symptom of the much deeper divisions which plague Northern Ireland. We must, along with all politicians committed to a peaceful solution, continue to seek to overcome those.

This can only be done in a Talks process in which all these issues can be addressed, and which is committed to securing an agreed outcome which respects the aspirations and principles of both parts of the community. I referred earlier to the democratic process of Talks which is in place. It is now more imperative than ever that it begins to address the substantive issues that lie at the heart of the divisions which have had such terrible consequences. I am pleased that this process continues tomorrow.

For our part the Government is fully committed to the Talks process. I and the Prime Minister will be meeting with the leaders of each of the parties involved over the coming days to hear their views of the way forward, and to emphasise our commitment to the Talks process.

I shall also be making arrangements in consultation with the Irish Government to meet them in an Intergovernmental Conference to discuss the mutual security interests between our two countries and to demonstrate the reasons behind the decisions taken last week. We intend on this basis to rebut very firmly quite unjustified and unwarranted criticism which has been made of the Government and of the RUC. In particular my purpose will be in the presence of the Chief Constable to rebut any suggestion of political interference in his operational decisions.

Madam Speaker, All those who wish to lead Northern Ireland towards a more peaceful future, and they certainly include the Government, must now work together to re-establish trust and dialogue.

None of us can accept a return to the violence of the last 25 years. All of us have a responsibility to do what we can to avoid that, and to demonstrate beyond all doubt that it is truly possible to find political and peaceful means of resolving Northern Ireland's profound problems. That is the challenge that confronts us now.