

Bulletin of the Committee on the Administration of Justice***The NIHRC Two Years on:
A Review of the Commission's Report on Effectiveness***

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) is one of the most important institutions created during the peace process. Its establishment represents significant progress toward a society that guarantees human rights for all. Like other governmentally-created human rights institutions around the world, the Commission's mandate is broad and inclusive. Not only does the NIHRC have the mission to "ensure the human rights of everyone in Northern Ireland are fully protected," it must do so in the varied domains of "law, policy, and practice." This is a huge task, and one that requires great diligence and skill, as well as adequate resources.

The law that created the Commission in 1998 also required the NIHRC to undertake a comprehensive review of its work once the body reached its second anniversary. That time has come, and the NIHRC's two-year evaluation report was published recently. It reviews the Commission's functions and activities and examines the obstacles the NIHRC has faced. Because some of these obstacles have been severe, the report presents a robust set of recommendations for improvement.

In order for the Commission to fulfill its potential, its recommendations must be acted upon quickly and diligently.

Lack of resources

Among the most distressing points made in the report concerns the Commission's evaluation of the resource constraints placed on its work. The Commission has been forced to cut back its activities in a number of crucial areas solely because of its poor funding. Basic functions such as the provision of legal advice and training have been truncated due to shortages in staffing. The Commission has been unable to establish a presence outside of Belfast. And even activities required by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement,

such as consultation with the community on the new Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, have suffered due to funding shortfalls. When outreach and community consultation is truncated, the Commission's work is made less relevant and useful. By way of comparison, the Equality Commission receives ten times the funding of the NIHRC; the International Commission on Decommissioning has more money devoted to its work than the NIHRC; and the RUC spends the equivalent of the NIHRC's yearly budget in only *ten hours*.

Resources are only part of the story. The NIHRC's ability to conduct a human rights review of proposed legislation – a function that is very cost-effective – has been hindered by the Commission's limited access to

draft bills. In many instances, the Commission has had very little time to assess proposed legislation. In some cases, the government refused to discuss legal advice it received on key portions of important proposals, including the Terrorism Bill and the Police (Northern Ireland) Bill. To remedy these problems, the NIHRC recommends that the Secretary of State and the Executive Committee of the Assembly be required to provide early copies of draft legislation to the Commission, and that both also be required to give "due regard" to the Commission's advice.

The NIHRC has a broad training mandate, with a focus on direct provision of training on issues like the Bill of Rights, and review of training programs for government personnel such as police officers. The Commission's work on the first area has been limited only by resources – the Commission has been forced to establish a waiting list for individuals and organizations interested in receiving training on the Bill of Rights. In the second area, the Commission was concerned on finding serious shortcomings in the training of the police service on the Human Rights Act. These shortcomings underline the necessity of early consultation with the NIHRC by government bodies

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designing training for personnel whose work impacts human rights. The police must pay particular attention to this requirement: if a human rights ethos is to be successfully integrated into policing, the training program for the new service must be designed with the close consultation of the Human Rights Commission.

The NIHRC has the power to conduct investigations into human rights issues of concern. With this authority, the Commission undertakes investigations into situations in which there appears to be a *pattern* of abuse, or where the abuse alleged is *serious*. The Commission intends to conduct two investigations a year. Thus far, it has completed one investigation into the recording of the use of plastic bullets in Northern Ireland (June 2001). The investigation found that the RUC's record keeping was inadequate in a number of cases in which plastic bullets were used, and that several cases had been closed without adequate accountability measures being implemented. Based on these findings, the Commission made recommendations for improvements.

An investigation into the care of children in juvenile justice centres is underway. The Commission has run into problems obtaining important documents from government offices and voluntary agencies. In some cases, there has been debate between agencies concerning who owned various documents and who therefore could consent to sharing the documents with the Commission. In other cases, the Commission has met with outright unwillingness to share records. The RUC and the coroner's office have been particularly reticent to provide documents. The Commission must be given access to relevant documents in order to complete its investigations fully. Toward this end, the Commission recommends new legislation that would explicitly grant the Commission authority to apply for compulsory production of the documents it requires when agencies are not forthcoming.

Interventions

In a very disturbing development, recent judicial interpretations of the Human Rights Commission's statutory functions have construed the NIHRC's authority extremely narrowly. During the summer of 2000, the NIHRC applied for leave to intervene as a third party in the inquest into the deaths of victims of the Omagh bombing in 1998. The Commission sought leave to intervene so that it could offer advice about the human rights aspects of the inquest, focusing particularly on whether the inquest should examine police effectiveness in response to bomb warnings. The Coroner refused the Commission's application, and the Commission sought judicial review of his decision. Lord Chief Justice Carswell determined that the Commission lacked the authority to intervene because there was no express delineation of such a power in the NIHRC's governing legislation. On April 6, 2001, the Court of Appeal

upheld LCJ Carswell's ruling. An application for leave to appeal to the House of Lords is pending. These cramped readings of the NIHRC's statutory authority are extremely disappointing. They underline the urgency of the Commission's recommendations that its authority in a number of areas be explicitly written into law. These areas, including the ability to give legal advice and to act as a third party intervenor or *amicus curiae*, are central to the NIHRC's mission. Adopting legislation that would make these powers explicit will bring the NIHRC's powers into line with those of human rights commissions from all over the world.

Throughout its assessment of its functions and effectiveness, the Commission makes reference to an internationally recognized set of principles developed by the United Nations. Referred to as the "Paris Principles," these guidelines were developed to specify the attributes and powers needed to ensure that human rights institutions function successfully. They are widely used and are regarded as the minimum requirements for effective human rights institutions. The principles articulate the following requirements for human rights commissions: independence, clear and strong authority to act, the ability to undertake investigations into abuses, and the competence to prepare reports and give advice. Above all, perhaps, is the requirement of adequate funding: even a strong mandate and clear authority will be meaningless without sufficient resources.

By placing the Paris Principles at the center of its evaluation, the NIHRC calls on neutral standards to guide its work and support its recommendations. These recommendations demonstrate beyond doubt that substantial improvements must be made in order to bring the NIHRC into line with international standards.

The Commission's report includes recommendations for legislative amendments that would shore up its independence, clarify its casework authority, fortify its reviewing functions, and strengthen its advisory, investigative and promotional activities. These proposals should be taken up without delay. It would be a monumental mistake to allow the weaknesses in the Commission's authority and funding to eclipse its potential. The future of human rights in Northern Ireland depend in part on the strength and effectiveness of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

Meg Satterthwaite

Lawyers Committee for Human Rights

UPDATE

Inquest hearing

The Coroner for Belfast, John Leckey held a special hearing on Thursday 7th June in relation to a number of inquests which had been delayed pending the outcome of the right to life cases before the European Court of Human Rights (Kelly, Shanaghan, Jordan and McKerr v UK), which were delivered on 4th May.

When the hearing opened, the Lord Chancellor's representative requested that it be adjourned because the government had not yet decided whether to refer the right to life judgements to the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights. The government had until 4th August to decide whether this course would be pursued. He indicated that the decision would be taken at cabinet level and given that the election was being held that very day, the Lord Chancellor felt the matter should be left to the new government.

The adjournment was opposed by those acting for the deceased's next of kin but was nevertheless granted. The Coroner indicated that he did not think that the adjournment would lead to any delay in the actual listing of the inquests themselves. The matter was listed for hearing again on 4th September.

There was then an exchange between the Coroner and counsel for the RUC in relation to the Jordan inquest and the disclosure to the Coroner of material about the planning of the inquest. Counsel for the RUC indicated that the domestic jurisprudence made clear that the planning of such operations was outside the scope of the inquest. The Coroner however said that if the government did not seek to appeal the judgements from Strasbourg, the scope of the inquest would have to be broadened to include planning. In response counsel for the police indicated that a government decision to accept the judgements would not necessarily mean his clients would "bow down" to the decisions of the European court. Given that this lawyer was instructed by the police, one wonders what this attitude indicates about the supposed new human rights dispensation for policing.

Paul Mageean

Up to date with CAJ

There have been meetings of the Policing, Bill of Rights and Equality subgroups.

We would like to welcome this year's US interns, Peggy Finster and Wanda Sanchez to CAJ.

They will be assisting in research and work around criminal justice and equality.

Paul gave presentations in Pristina by invitation from the Council of Europe.

Paul attended a conference on transitional justice.

Liz and Michael attended the launch of the West Belfast Festival.

Michael, Peggy and Clemens attended the AGM of the Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all our regular volunteers for their contribution to CAJ's work.

Finally, due to the holidays, as usual, a combined July/August issue will be produced.

Liz McAleer

Thoughts on the 11+
A research report examining children's experiences of the transfer test

Madeline Leonard & Ciara Davey

Save the Children have published a unique new report examining the views and opinions of over 360 primary 7 children, from Belfast, on the transfer test. The report contains vivid descriptions of how children feel throughout the whole process. Doing the practice tests, preparing and deciding to do the 11+, the night before the tests, sitting them and receiving the results. Their experiences are frank, vivid and build up a unique image of what it was like to take the test and the agonising wait for the report. Essential reading for anyone interested in the current debate on the future of the 11+.

Copies are available, price £10, from Rosie McDonald, Save the Children, Popper House, 15 Richmond Park, Belfast, BT10 0HB, tel 028 90 431123, fax 028 90 431314 or email r.mcdonald@scfuk.org.uk

Determining the right to march

With another marching season just around the corner, this review of the Parades Commission's determinations since the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), questions whether the Public Processions (NI) Act 1998 is fulfilling its objectives.

The Parades Commission has issued over forty determinations between 1st January and 1st June this year. More than half of these relate to Portadown LOL No.1's weekly application to parade along the Garvaghy Road. Every determination has invoked Articles 10 and 11 of the ECHR (freedom of expression and peaceful assembly respectively). Many also refer to Article 8 and Article 1 of Protocol 1 (private and family life, and peaceful enjoyment of one's possessions) and some even raise Article 2 (the right to life).

Since October, there have been two Judicial Reviews of Commission decisions, with the possibility of a third later this month. The first is dealt with below, but the written judgement of Kerr J in the second – *In the matter of an application by Patricia Pelan for Judicial Review* – remains outstanding. The third, if it goes ahead, will examine whether or not the Commission is bound by Article 6 of the ECHR (the right to a fair trial), and arises from a St. Patrick's Day parade in Kilkeel.

The determinations of the Parades Commission can be evaluated against two of the objectives which underpinned the Public Processions Act (the Act).

An institutional stopgap?

Serving as both a carrot and a stick, it was hoped that the Commission would foster a context where organisers of parades would take full responsibility for their events, and do everything possible to ensure no trouble ensued. Ultimately, the Commission would forfeit its *raison d'être*.

While it may seem that there is a long way to go before this objective is realised, significant advances have been made. The Commission has emphasised that compliance with its Code of Conduct will be carefully monitored, and a number of additional Parades Commission monitors have been recruited this year. Monitors are briefed to report instances of good conduct as well as breaches of either the Code or the Commission's determination.

Another development has been the Commission's willingness to lift specific restrictions when parade organisers have given further assurances regarding the good conduct of those on parade. This has resulted in a number of successful in-house reviews of Commission determinations (although not all those parades have been incident free).

A law-breaker's charter?

A second objective of the Act was to provide alternative criteria by which decisions about parades could be taken. Previously, decisions by the police were based solely on the potential for public disorder, or disruption to the life of the community. This meant, in effect, that the party posing the greatest threat won. The Commission has been keen to use the additional criteria, and continues to do so (principally, the impact of a parade on relationships within the community). However, the commencement of the HRA has seen an increasing tendency also to cite the likelihood of public disorder in support of decisions.

This can *partially* be explained by the Court of Appeal judgement of Carswell LCJ in the first post-HRA parades Judicial Review – *In the matter of an application by David Tweed for leave to apply for Judicial Review* (26/10/00). The applicant argued that the Commission was not entitled to take into account the impact of the parade on relationships within the community. Carswell LCJ stated:

"The issue...is whether the restriction imposed on the parade can properly be said to be justified on one of the grounds specified in Article 11(2), whatever factors the Commission may have taken into account in reaching its decision"[emphasis added].

Under Article 11(2), though, restrictions on parades need not be justified on public order grounds at all. Instead, they could be imposed solely to protect the rights and freedoms of others (although the impact of a parade on community relations is not necessarily co-terminous with this). That said, in all the Article 11 cases decided in Strasbourg, the authorities have relied on the prevention of disorder clause. More disappointingly, and largely due to reliance on the margin of appreciation (which should not affect domestic decisions), the ECHR does not offer clear guidance either on what level of public disorder may justify restrictions on peaceful assemblies, or on whether it matters *where* the threat of disorder comes from.

An unfortunate side effect of the HRA is that public bodies who have a duty to give effect to Convention rights view it as just another hurdle. The challenge for the Parades Commission is not merely to comply with the HRA, but to think about how best to develop a more robust jurisprudence in Northern Ireland. Given the inevitability of public order considerations, the question is not how to avoid taking decisions on public order grounds, but rather how to take a clear and principled decision on those (and other) grounds.

Michael Hamilton

Michael Hamilton is co-author of *"Parades, Protests, and Policing: A Human Rights Framework"* (Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission - March 2001).

Peace Agreements and Human Rights

Christine Bell's excellent study sets out to analyse the human rights component of peace agreements in 4 conflicts with "ethnic dimensions": South Africa, Northern Ireland, Bosnia Herzegovina, and Israel-Palestine. Bell looks at the peace process and its bargaining, as well as its results in terms of human rights institutions ("building for the future"), dealing with the unjust consequences of the past (issues such as refugees and dispossession of land), and dealing with the past in terms of issues of justice and impunity (prisoners, accountability, truth).

The structure within thematic chapters assists cross-disciplinary understanding (what international law says, what happens in each case, what this implies about the evolving relationship between human rights and politics, justice and peace). The result is a really useful dialogue between the points of view of universal norms of human rights and *realpolitik* bargainers in violent conflicts, which is respectful of both viewpoints and helps them to understand better how their interaction assists societies in transition.

There are some key concepts underlined in this book which are, in themselves, useful in increasing understanding between the different viewpoints. The "meta-conflict" is the ongoing disagreement between the sides as to what the conflict itself is about. As Bell emphasises, a peace process is, in part, an attempt to begin to resolve this meta-conflict, to begin to agree what the conflict has been about. "Until there is substantial agreement about the causes of the conflict, it is almost impossible to reach agreement on how the divided society can account for the past, because the parties are essentially still waging the conflict." (p.301)

Similarly, the bargain is often a meta-bargain, that is, a negotiation about how to negotiate, in the course of which new processes and understandings may emerge. A third key concept is the "jurisprudence of transition," the understanding that "human rights provisions are included in peace agreements precisely because without them peace cannot be achieved or has no content." (p.303) Peace agreements are by nature interim arrangements, transitional constitutions, attempts to mediate between the past which no one wishes to repeat, and the future which is not yet agreed. These agreements include certain human rights provisions rather than others, and address or do not address accountability in the ways that they do, for reasons

which represent a complex interplay between factors of the particular history and context, estimations of current power balances, and expectations to move in future toward greater integration, the consociational balancing of group interests, or greater separation.

This is not to discount the importance of human rights and international law in upholding more universal standards. Bell reassures us that even transitional arrangements may be influenced by and evaluated against norms. Her four cases end up in pairs, illustrating opposite points. Her reading of the agreements in South Africa and Northern Ireland is that these were largely internally-motivated agreements, mediated by considerable international attention on the contents and outcomes. "...[T]he application of international law created conditions which both limited the conflict and provided a normative framework, so that when the parties came to negotiate, the legitimate parameters of any solution were relatively clear." (p.116) In the cases of Israel/Palestine and Bosnia Herzegovina, the impetus was largely external, and "the international community's inability to agree on the parameters of the solution hampered attempts to limit the conflict by enforcing human rights provisions and preventing ethnic population shifts. Conversely, the inability of the international community to enforce basic human rights and humanitarian law protections created a fluid numbers game in which parties to the conflict could further their self-determination claims through illegitimate 'fact-creation' on the ground." (Ibid.) Her conclusion is to reinforce the responsibility both of the international community and of international law. "The place, role, and scope of human rights institutions should be understood to be largely determinative of the type of transformation of both conflict and society which will be possible." (p.320)

As always, it is a slightly odd experience, looking at the situation here in N.I. as only one of four comparative case studies. This can be helpful, both in reminding us that there are similarities and differences between the different situations, and in putting painful local reality into perspective. Her conclusions about the N.I. process are always interesting, if sometimes cryptic.

Sue Williams

[Sue Williams is an independent consultant on conflict, based in Derry.]

Christine Bell. *Peace Agreements and Human Rights*. ISBN 0-19-829889-7 Oxford Press, London, Cost £36.00

Bloody Sunday and the Rule of Law in Northern Ireland

Professor Walsh's book, 'Bloody Sunday and the Rule of Law in Northern Ireland' provides a detailed analysis of the way in which the law has been used as a tool of executive expediency in Northern Ireland. He argues that Bloody Sunday presents the ultimate example of law and justice being set to one side, in order to serve the interests of the security forces and political establishment. However Bloody Sunday is not unique and simply confirmed what was an already established pattern of security force excesses going unchecked.

Bloody Sunday and the Widgery Inquiry form the largest case study in the book. Professor Walsh tries to expose the way in which the law and justice system in Northern Ireland have failed to provide a check against or remedy for a whole series of excesses by the security forces.

In his survey of the law and security practices which extends from the Government of Ireland Act 1914 through to the present day, Professor Walsh traces a history of manipulation and abuse of the law and criminal justice system. He argues that this abuse has profoundly damaged the rule of law in Northern Ireland.

The first half of the book deals with the legal and political situation in Northern Ireland before Bloody Sunday and moves to the Widgery Inquiry and Report. He discusses the establishment and institutions of the state, the history of policing, and the scope of the Special Powers Act. Professor Walsh argues that the law functioned as a vehicle for, rather than a check against, the discriminatory and oppressive policies of the Northern Irish Government. The law provided whatever powers were needed by the security forces to deal with opposition. In turn, this created the environment for Bloody Sunday because it sent the signal to the security forces that their freedom to resort to lethal force would not be curbed by the law.

Professor Walsh examines the failings of the Widgery Inquiry and its far-reaching implications. Not only did the Inquiry fail in its task of inspiring public confidence in the truth and fullness of its findings, its conclusions convey the impression that the soldiers acted lawfully. The Inquiry avoided the opportunity to test and clarify the law relating to the use of lethal force and shattered confidence in the rule of law and integrity of the state.

In the second section of the book, Professor Walsh turns his attention to the law and security policy since Bloody Sunday. He argues that the broad strategy which prevailed up to and including Bloody Sunday has continued to the present - principally that the requirements of security policy have remained paramount. He examines the workings of the emergency legislation which replaced the Special Powers Act and argues that the changes to the trial procedure coupled with extensive police and army powers have dramatically altered the criminal justice system in favour of the state. Added to this, judicial inaction encouraged the police to believe that their arrest and interrogation strategy had the support of the judicial system. He considers lethal force case law, noting a shift from an objective to subjective test when determining mistaken belief and so tilting the balance in favour of the Security Forces.

Professor Walsh has combined his two fields of research in this book, his work on the Widgery Inquiry for the Bloody Sunday Trust and his own academic interest in the interaction between security policy and the law. His command of both areas is evident throughout. However whilst the same themes underpin the book, it reads as if it has been assembled in haste from a number of different sources. This is disappointing because the book makes an important statement about the manner in which the nationalist community was deprived of the protection of the law and the way in which the law facilitated and sanctioned their abuse at the hands of the state.

One of the most interesting questions that Professor Walsh poses is whether Bloody Sunday was a turning point or whether it was the most atrocious example of the law being hijacked by the executive. Both interpretations can be read into the book. Certainly Professor Walsh sees Bloody Sunday as a watershed but the question deserved more in depth discussion.

The book provides a considerable and impressive contribution to the literature on Bloody Sunday. Professor Walsh sees the seeds for the restoration of nationalist confidence in the rule of law within the measures of the Peace Agreement but warns that it will be a long, slow journey.

With the Saville Inquiry still having many months to run, we await the definitive analysis of the full impact of Bloody Sunday on the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Catherine McKenna

(Observer at Bloody Sunday Tribunal)

CAJ Director in Amnesty Mission to Middle East

At the end of April, Amnesty International conducted a mission to Israel and Palestine to launch its draft human rights agenda for peace. The Secretary General of Amnesty International, Pierre Sane, led the delegation and invited me to join them.

The purpose of the mission was to try to ensure that human rights concerns would be addressed in any future peace process. The initiative arose out of Amnesty's belief that one of the failings of the Oslo process was that it did not deal in any meaningful way with the human rights aspects of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. There was also a concern that unless the civil societies in Israel and Palestine pushed for the inclusion of human rights measures they would be left out of the picture in future negotiations. At the same time, there was a feeling that human rights had been recognised as a core building block for the Good Friday Agreement. Thus, there would be a value in having a local human rights activist talk about our experiences in N. Ireland.

The main focus for our mission was to meet with NGO's in both Israel and Palestine and to discuss the draft human rights agenda that Amnesty had prepared. The document provoked a mixed response. Many of the Palestinian NGOs were concerned that the list of rights was limited and did not address issues such as the right to self determination, the settlements, or economic and social rights. Some Israeli NGOs were concerned that it included the right for Palestinian refugees to return. The list of rights included was of course dictated by the Amnesty mandate and we frequently had to explain that the document was really designed to encourage local NGOs

in both societies to draw up their own human rights agendas for inclusion in any future peace process. Throughout the visit I was able to speak about our work in Northern Ireland to try and ensure that the peace process addressed human rights concerns and the problems associated with implementation.

In addition to the meetings with NGOs, the delegation members met with the Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Israel. The meeting with the Director General was particularly shocking in that, though reputedly a liberal, he was prepared to justify torture to us.

The overall tone of the visit was fairly depressing in that, just before I met up with the other Amnesty mission delegates, they had in fact had a stun grenade fired at them by Israeli Defence Forces while visiting Rafah. Almost everyone we met felt that the situation would further escalate - something that has clearly since proved to be the case. There was also a fair degree of pessimism about the prospects for future negotiations. That said the mission certainly achieved its goal of promoting some debate about the role which respect for human rights must play in any future peace negotiations.

Personally, I came away even more convinced that the NI approach which seeks to place human rights at the centre of the peace building process is entirely correct. It is worth remembering this, even while we regularly realise just how far we still have to go to ensure its implementation in practice.

Martin O'Brien
CAJ Director

Action Column

Members of CAJ may wish to write to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (Temple Court, 39 North Street, Belfast 1) indicating their support for the Commission's recommendations that it be given more resources and powers. A full copy of the report is available from the Commission's office and/or on their website www.nihrc.org.

In the Headlines

CAJ holds newspaper clippings on more than 50 civil liberties and justice issues (from mid 1987- December 2000). Copies of these can be purchased from CAJ office. The clippings are also available for consultation at the office.

Anyone interested in this service, should phone (028) 9096 1122.

Civil Liberties Diary

May 1 At the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, (now into day 105) several witnesses described high velocity bullets hitting a wall above people in the crowd from a platform in the Bogside on Bloody Sunday. The evidence raised new questions about whether there was deliberate firing at the platform party.

May 2 An RUC detective has claimed the forces' Special Branch destroyed a tape carrying the confession of a loyalist said to be involved in the murder of solicitor Pat Finucane in 1989. Sergeant Johnston Brown, who retired last month has described himself as a reluctant whistleblower compelled to go public to set the record straight.

May 3 A campaign to stamp out racism was launched yesterday in response to findings that people in Northern Ireland were twice as likely to be racist as sectarian. It coincided with the launch of a video, "True Colours" produced by young people through the Children's Law Centre.

May 5 The European Court of Human Rights has judged that all contentious deaths, regardless of the circumstances must be fully and effectively investigated by the authorities. The renewed demands for such investigations came after the ECHR ordered the British government to pay ten thousand pounds in compensation to the families of 12 men shot dead in controversial shootings between 1982 and 1992. The court decided that subsequent official inquiries including the relevant inquests had been inadequate and were in breach of the European convention on Human Rights.

May 9 A consultation was launched yesterday by First Minister Mr Trimble and Deputy First Minister Mr Mallon. The document entitled "Promoting Equality of Opportunity" will build on existing equality and anti-discrimination law and extend the law to include the categories of age and sexual orientation.

May 10 On day 110 of the Bloody Sunday inquiry an English journalist told the inquiry that he and his colleagues were briefed by senior British army officers that 'something special' was going to happen in Derry on Bloody Sunday.

May 15 Unwed fathers are set to be handed greater parental responsibility as new legislation moved a step closer to enactment at Stormont. The Family Law Bill, which also gives step-parents more authority for their spouse's children, gained unanimous consent as it passed its consideration stage in the Assembly. Another aspect of the Bill is a presumption of paternity. This applies where a man was married to the child's mother at any time between conception and birth and where he has been registered as the child's father. Parental responsibility in this context could only be terminated by a court order.

May 17 Politicians asked to call for a ban on plastic bullets as part of their election manifesto in West Belfast. In a joint plea the United Campaign Against Plastic Bullets, the Pat Finucane Centre and Relatives for Justice called for opposition to the introduction of the so called 'safer' round on June 1st.

May 18 Sectarian discrimination is still a major problem in NI according to the latest figures released by the Equality Commission. Fifty six cases were brought under fair employment legislation and resulted in out of court settlements.

May 25 An appeal for families to have their say in the Human Organs Inquiry set up by Health Minister Bairbre de Bruin has sparked a wave of calls to the team's Belfast office. In January it emerged that the Royal Hospital had retained and stored the organs of 361 babies without the informed consent of families. The inquiry is expected to report within 12 months.

May 29 A Human Rights Commission study has warned that some schools in NI may be in breach of international human rights and equality standards. The report throws doubt on using criteria such as interviews, behaviour, attendance, sporting or musical ability and parental preference for a particular school. It suggests also that equality of opportunity may be being denied to pupils from socially disadvantaged background and also on grounds of religion, race, sex or lifestyle.

May 31 In its most recent Annual report, Amnesty International (AI) has raised NI human rights concerns. AI is particularly concerned with the number of inquests still outstanding at the end of last year into disputed killings and deaths in custody. The report also points out that the Police (NI) Act 2000, failed to highlight the centrality of human rights and did not include many of the Patten measures for police accountability. It also highlighted a lack of progress with investigation into the killings of lawyers Pat Finucane and Rosemary Nelson. As AI celebrates its 40th birthday many thousands of people are still prisoners of conscience, torture is still practised in 150 countries and countless people are still detained without trial or sentenced, sometimes to death, in unfair trials.

Compiled by Peter Gahan from various newspaper sources.

Just News

Just News welcomes readers' news, views and comments.

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