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**MEETING BETWEEN SIR KENNETH BLOOMFIELD AND RELATIVES OF VICTIMS OF NI RELATED VIOLENCE**

**Glencree Centre for Reconciliation , Saturday 25 April 1998**

The above event opened with a public forum which was attended by all the families (approximately 50 people which included the extended family of the victims mainly of the 1974 Dublin and Monaghan bombings, in particular the O'Reilly and Massey families, as well as a Garda who had been shot during a bank-raid and a woman whose husband had been killed during a separate INLA bank-raid ) and the press. As agreed, I also attended this session.In his opening remarks, Sir Bloomfield stated that the scope of the Northern Ireland Victims Commission would extend to victims in N.Ireland; the Republic of Ireland; mainland Britain and Europe. In the six months since the Commission was set up he has received hundreds of letters from politicians, churches, ordinary people etc. As NI civil servant he had assumed that the problems relating to victims had been solved but now he realises that many problems have remained unattended to. Indeed, as head of the NI Civil Service for 7 years he was the first person in authority, he feels particularly culpable in this area and is approaching the subject with " sackcloth and ashes " Although, neither he nor any of his family had been hurt physically by the violence his home had been blown up which had caused trauma and given him some insight into the suffering of others.

Points made by Sir Bloomfield:

He said that he hoped to do a preliminary report by mid-May. He also pointed out the smallness of the operation . Despite its somewhat grandiose title, the Commission consisted only of himself and his assistant Mary ( Butcher ).

He was at present considering the options for a memorial function or symbol although he realised that this could be controversial. His personal preference was for a garden which symbolised regrowth.

However, the more contact he had with victims made him realise that there were other major problems. As 91% of the victims had been the male bread- winners of families, the economic problems of the victims, in particular, were and continue to be significant. Few people realised how bad the compensation had been. He referred to EU Funds for Peace and Reconciliation which might be used in this connection.

He also had become aware of the psychological effects of the trauma suffered by the victims families and the ongoing need for counselling and the fact that there were so many medical victims amongst those who had survived, for example amputees for whom the medical services were inadequate. It was not known exactly how many people were injured.

He believed that a public officer should be appointed to avoid dispersion of activities and who would be responsible for an overall cohesive approach to the problem of victims.

He also referred to the wide scale problem of the bodies of the victims of paramilitary

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violence which had never been located ;

Important Points made by the Participants :

A general discussion followed in which the following most important points were made by the participants :

- lack of assistance by the Government and the media in following up on the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. There were references to a possible cover-up exercise.

- it was ironic that the first person to approach the victims' families officially ( as opposed to their approaches to the Irish Government over the years which was described as running into a brick wall) should be from N.Ireland;

- refusal by the Department of Justice (?) to hand over the relevant files to the Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg;

- nobody has been brought to justice for the bombings which was the atrocity which claimed more lives from a single atrocity than any other event since the violence began. The fact that nobody had been brought to justice, made the healing process very difficult.

- lack of meaningful compensation paid to the victims, although this was not dealt with as a major issue;

- the Garda blame the RUC for lack of co-operation in the investigations leading to the conspiracy theory that the British Government were behind the event;

- Government representatives should arrange a meeting with the victims;

- the Government should apologise;

- The issue of the release of prisoners was also raised. The murderer of the brother of one of those present will be amongst the present batch of prisoners being released. The first the family were aware of this was from newspaper reports and found it very painful the fact that they were not treated with enough consideration to be informed beforehand by the Government of the impending release.

Summary

The atmosphere was emotional but quite positive. Sir Bloomfield himself broke down on two occasions during the proceedings. The families expressed their gratitude to him that he had taken the time to listen to them which several compared to the unsatisfactory dealings with Irish officialdom to date. Their contributions were in the main were clear and logical. They themselves laid great emphasis on the need for healing the wounds and in this regard the importance of the truth being finally established about the event.They also attached importance to the question of the release of prisoners although they were not all in agreement on this point. In this connection, the possibility of a Commission for Truth and Reconciliation on the lines of that set up in post- Apartheid South Africa was mooted.They

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The speakers were overwhelming in their support for the Agreement. For your information, I was introduced to Sir Bloomfield before the meeting.

Ian White stressed to me after the meeting that the role of the Centre was to assist the healing process of healing and build up relationships. In this connection he was arranging contacts between families of victims in Ireland, Britain and N.Ireland. However, he was anxious to avoid Glencree being used as vehicle for lobbying.

Comment

In view of the widespread and sympathetic coverage this event has received in the media, as well as the fact the "Prime Time" will be devoting a programme to the Dublin/ Monaghan bombings in the near future, it seems likely that the issue of victims' families will increase in importance . Some thought might be given as to whether the Government in particular with regard to commitment entered into in the Agreement might wish to activate matters in this field rather than reacting. It might be appropriate for the Minister for Justice to meet the families or that some contact at official level be made with Sir Bloomfield. We might speak to the Dept. Justice about this. Ian White has already written to the Minister for Justice seeking comprehensive information on victims in Ireland but so far has not received any reply.

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