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## NORTHERN IRELAND Information Service

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21 March 1988

MURDER OF SOLDIERS - STATEMENT AT WESTMINSTER BY RT HON TOM KING MP,  
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the recent killings in Northern Ireland, and especially on the murders of two soldiers in Belfast on Saturday, 19 March.

I must remind the House of the background and sequence of events during the last week in Northern Ireland. On Wednesday the funerals were held of the 3 IRA terrorists killed in Gibraltar. In spite of the very large crowds and the extremely tense situation in West Belfast, the funerals had proceeded in an orderly manner, without violence and without any paramilitary display. This was the position when a vicious attack took place at Milltown Cemetery by a loyalist gunman. In that attack 3 people attending the funeral were killed and a large number injured, of whom one remains in intensive care.

On Thursday there was the funeral of the IRA gunman shot by the Army on Monday. He was acknowledged by the IRA as one of their members. His funeral took place without disturbance and without paramilitary display.

On Friday the funeral took place of Charles McCrillen, a Catholic with no paramilitary connections, shot by the UFF; and of Thomas McErlean, one of the three killed at Milltown Cemetery. These again took place peacefully and without any breach of the law.

On Saturday the funerals of the other two killed at Milltown Cemetery took place, first that of John Murray, and second that of Kevin Brady, who was acknowledged by PIRA to be one of their members. It was at this funeral that the quite horrific events took place that have so shocked the world.

I would like to tell the House the facts as far as they can be established about these events. Just after midday on Saturday, following the funeral service at St Agnes Church, the cortege moved off along Andersonstown Road towards Milltown Cemetery. At that point a civilian car attempted to reverse away from the cortege. Despite the television coverage of the subsequent events which many Hon Members will have seen, it remains unclear how the car came to be in that position and for how long it had been on that road. What is quite clear, however, is that as it reversed away from the cortege, its way was blocked, both forward and backward, by taxis accompanying the funeral. What immediately followed is a matter of sickening visual record. A number of those in the funeral cortege immediately set upon the car with the obvious intention of pulling out the two occupants. Photographs indicate that at this point the driver of the car leaned out of his window and fired one shot in the air - the only shot which both occupants fired in the course of the attack upon them. After only a moment's pause the crowd resumed the onslaught on the car, some of them smashing at it with iron bars, and eventually succeeded in hauling out both occupants. Both men were then dragged by the crowd into an adjacent stadium, the gates were closed and it appears that a smaller group of attackers continued to assault them, stripped them and searched their clothing, subsequently threw them over a wall, and then bundled them into a black taxi which took them to a nearby piece of wasteland, where they were shot.

It subsequently emerged that the two victims were corporals in the Royal Corps of Signals Corporal Wood and Corporal Howes. Shortly beforehand they had left a joint police and Army base in North Howard Street Mill after completing a routine maintenance task, in order to return to their unit at Lisburn. They had no reason to be in the vicinity of the funeral. This is not an approved route for soldiers who are not on operational duty at the time, and there is absolutely no question of their being involved in any way with surveillance or any other duties connected with the funeral. I am therefore unable to tell the House with any certainty why they were there.

If the most likely explanation is that they decided to take the shortest route back to their base, without appreciating the presence of the funeral, this can only be conjecture, and it will probably never be known why they were there.

Whatever the reason however, nothing can conceivably justify the utterly appalling outrage that then occurred and which resulted in their deaths. The whole House will join me in extending the utmost sympathy to their families, and even more so in view of the awful television pictures of the occasion. Nor has it gone unnoticed and rightly so that although they both had loaded personal protection pistols, they showed incredible restraint in only using them to fire a warning shot in the air.

In the face of this outrage and the others in the week, the first and immediate objective is to bring to justice those responsible. In respect of the Milltown Cemetery attack, a man will shortly be charged with these murders, and also a number of other serious offences. In respect of the killing of the soldiers two men are already in custody. In addition a massive murder investigation is under way, in which all possible resources are involved, to identify all those responsible.

The next issue I wish to address is that of the approach of the RUC to the conduct of these funerals. Large funerals and processions are arguably the most difficult events from a public order and a terrorist threat situation that the security forces face. They have been used quite unscrupulously by paramilitaries for propaganda purposes.

The Chief Constable in determining the most appropriate method of policing any funeral, takes account of all the relevant circumstances in reaching his decision. Clearly a prime consideration has been that they should be conducted within the law and without paramilitary display. He would also have regard to the degree to which other elements would seek deliberately to exploit the presence of the police to provoke violence and disorder.

There have been suggestions made that the arrangements for the funerals were the consequence of a political directive and that there had been some interference with the operational independent responsibility of the Chief Constable. This is quite false. The Chief Constable has asked me to make quite clear that he takes full responsibility for the arrangements for the funerals, that these were policing decisions, taken after the most careful assessment of all the relevant circumstances.

I would emphasise that I fully support the decisions that he took in these matters, and in which the initial outcome had clearly been successful. However, clearly the two incidents that subsequently occurred are wholly unacceptable and do require immediate review in regard to policing to be followed at any future funeral. The Chief Constable has informed me this morning that he is carrying this through as a matter of urgency.

I can tell the House, I know that he will carry through this work with great integrity. But the House knows well how difficult this task is, to ensure that funerals can proceed in good order and within the law, when these are elements who have absolutely no scruples or respect for family feelings in the way in which they will exploit them.

Faced with the appalling violence of the last weeks, not only in Belfast, but with the vicious murder of Jillian Johnston in Fermanagh, the murder of Constable Graham in the Creggan only this morning, the House may remember the words I spoke last Thursday about the desperate need to break the awful cycle of violence and retaliation and end the suffering and heartache that is achieving nothing but more misery for all. This is now urgent, and it is the time when every person with a spark of human decency must determine to give their full support to the fight against terrorism from whichever quarter it may come. The security forces will take the lead as they have done so bravely over the years, but they must have the whole-hearted co-operation of everybody in the Province, in the island of Ireland, and throughout the United Kingdom, in their task. I saw this morning, Archbishop Eames, Cardinal O'Fee, the Moderator and Secretary of the Presbyterian church and President of the Methodist Church, on the need for all in the Province to take their share of responsibility and to condemn violence in all its forms.

It is vital that we also help the community in any way to support the fight against terrorism and in this connection we are improving significantly the confidential telephone system. Very shortly indeed we shall be supplementing the present system with a single and easily memorable freefone number usable right across the Province. I have asked the broadcasting authorities to publicise this number and they have readily agreed. This will be a valuable strengthening of the present facility, which is in fact being used by a considerable number of people in their horror at the events of Saturday.

The fight against republican terrorism must be waged also beyond the confines of Northern Ireland and particularly raises major challenges for the Government of the Republic of Ireland. A significant number of steps have been taken to help improve cross border co-operation, and we particularly appreciate the amount of weapons and explosives that have already been recovered by the Garda. We have to keep working to improve this co-operation in our common interest to defeat terrorism, and I have this morning agreed with Mr Lenihan that there will be a further meeting of the Intergovernmental Conference this week, in which we shall be discussing cross border security co-operation, and which will be attended by Mr Lenihan and myself, as co-Chairmen, by Mr Collins, the Irish Minister of Justice and my Rt Hon Friend the Minister of State and by the Chief Constable and the Commissioner of the Garda.

Mr Speaker, the common phrase this weekend is that the trouble of Northern Ireland has plumbed new depths of horror. That was the phrase at Enniskillen, that was the phrase at Milltown Cemetery, now the phrase in the Andersonstown Road on Saturday. And the truth is that there will be new depths again so long as this awful and violent campaign of terrorism and revenge continues. It has got to stop, in the name of humanity, and if there is to be any decent future for the people of Northern Ireland, for all those living in the island of Ireland and if the evil shroud of terrorism is to be lifted from the United Kingdom as a whole.

We all have our part to play whether in actively combating terrorism, through the security forces whether working to build bridges across communities, whether in deciding we do nothing in our words or actions that can increase the tensions. We all have our part to play, and the duty we owe to all the tragic victims of these outrages is to play that part to the full.