

Northern Ireland: Eyewitness accounts of 1972 "Bloody Sunday" massacre indict British army

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The Bloody Sunday Inquiry has begun to take statements from eyewitnesses involved in the events in Derry on January 30, 1972. On that day, British army paratroopers fired upon a peaceful civil rights demonstration in the Bogside area of the city, killing 13 people.

What became known as the "Bloody Sunday" massacre was part of an escalation of Britain's military occupation of Northern Ireland at a time of mounting social tensions. An estimated 50,000 people attended the Derry march, as many Catholic workers and young people, increasingly alienated from official politics, began demanding an end to anti-Catholic discrimination in the North. Most worrying for the authorities, the demand for civil rights was accompanied by calls for greater social and political equality in all areas.

The massacre at Derry was a turning point in the development of the so-called "Troubles". It led to the imposition of direct rule from London, and crucially helped drive significant sections of the Catholic working class enclaves in Derry and Belfast behind the previously small IRA

The Bloody Sunday Inquiry, which officially opened on Monday March 27, 2000, is headed by Lord Saville and his co-judges, John Toohey and William Hoyt. Since the Inquiry was announced in January 1998 they have amassed at least 60,000 pages of written submissions regarding the events. They have also interviewed nearly 1,500 civilians, soldiers, police officers, journalists and government officials. Other evidence submitted includes detailed maps of the area and photographic evidence.

Over the past weeks, the Inquiry has also heard a number of important and moving accounts from eyewitnesses to the events. On January 25, Damien Donaghy gave his testimony. Donaghy, the first victim of

the Bloody Sunday shootings to give evidence, was just 15 years old at the time. He said that he was unarmed when the British Army opened fire on him, wounding him in the leg. Whilst Donaghy admitted throwing stones earlier on, "when I was shot I did not have a nail bomb or anything else in my hands." Army claims that two nail bombs had exploded just before the soldiers opened fire—long used by army top brass to justify the shootings—were "lies", Donaghy said.

John Roddy told the Inquiry how he had received a warning to stay away from the civil rights march, because the paratroopers "were coming in and meant to do serious damage and even kill people". Roddy said a soldier he had befriended at Ebrington barracks gave him the advice in the week before the Derry march. As well as the specific warning not to attend the rally, Roddy said the soldier had advised him "If I knew anyone in the republican movement who had control of the march on that Sunday then I should get word to them that it should not go ahead."

Another witness, Charles McDaid, recollected that a telephonist at the Royal Ulster Constabulary's (RUC) headquarters in Derry warned him to stay away from the march because paratroopers were "coming in and coming in shooting".

McDaid said the message was passed to his wife on the morning of the march in an anonymous phone call. The message said, "Tell junior [Mr McDaid] not to go to the march because the paras are coming in and coming in shooting, and others have been informed." McDaid said the caller had later made herself known to him as Jean Manning, who has since died.

Larry Doherty, a veteran news photographer, told the Inquiry that an army press officer had informed journalists the night before the massacre that

photographers should stay behind the army lines as they were “going in hard”. Doherty said: "I remember him saying we should all go in behind the army rather than take pictures from the other side because the army 'is going in hard'. It was only afterwards that I attached significance to those words and came to the view that there must have been some element of planning to what happened that day."

Doherty said that he was prevented from taking pictures of soldiers terrorising half a dozen youths in the Shipquay Street area of the city centre on the day of the march. When he arrived at the street, he reported that he saw soldiers spread-eagling about half a dozen youths against a wall. Doherty said, "A soldier to my left turned around and pointed his rifle at me. He was only feet away from me. His gun was right up to my face. He was very aggressive and I was very scared. I was looking down the barrel of the gun and his finger was on the trigger. I dropped my camera to my chest and slunk back among the people on the other side of road."

The Inquiry has also received a 25-page transcript of a taped conversation of senior British army officers, making jokes and laughing about the bloodbath that had occurred earlier that day.

Despite this evidence, the British Ministry of Defence (MoD) insists that it has no case to answer before the Inquiry. The MoD does not have an official representative at the Inquiry, instead relying on an “observer,” and has no full-time legal representative in attendance. Ruling out any responsibility in advance of the Inquiry's findings, an MoD lawyer said on January 15 that, “The MoD of today has no case to put to or to advance before this tribunal nor does it have a position to defend."

The Labour government backs the MoD stance. Prime Minister Blair ordered the Inquiry as part of British efforts to incorporate Sinn Fein and the IRA into the new power-sharing structures in Northern Ireland. In convening the Inquiry, Blair stipulated that it must not undermine confidence in Britain's armed forces, nor must it “accuse individuals or institutions, or to invite fresh recriminations”. Lord Saville has already indicated that no legal proceedings will follow from the Inquiry's final report.

In line with this remit, large parts of MI5 (secret service) and British army documents made available to the Inquiry have been deleted. A number of critical documents relating to the army's role on that day are also the subject of so-called public interest immunity certificates—signed by government ministers and the

MoD—preventing them being disclosed to the Inquiry.

Lawyers representing the relatives of those killed and those acting for the British paratroopers are challenging the gagging orders. The families' lawyers insist they must have the right to scrutinise the document's contents, whilst the paratroopers' legal representatives claim the documents would support the view that the army had been fired upon first.

Both the MoD and the Home Office have cited Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights—the right to life—to justify their efforts to keep the documents under wraps. The government claims that soldiers would be put at risk of IRA reprisals if the material were disclosed. However, the families are also citing Article 2—which requires an "effective official investigation into deaths at the hands of state agents"—to support their case.

In another important development, on November 27 last year, Edwin Glasgow QC, a lawyer acting for the British soldiers who fired on the marchers, said that he accepted that none of the 13 killed and 14 injured were armed. Glasgow said, "We will not contend ... that those individuals who have been identified were armed with lethal weapons. It follows, as has rightly been accepted for a long time, that innocent people were killed on Bloody Sunday".

The statement directly contradicts the findings of the original 1972 Inquiry into Bloody Sunday, headed by the then Lord Chief Justice, Lord Widgery. The Widgery Inquiry completely exonerated the paratroopers and concluded that there was "strong evidence" that some of those killed or injured had been firing weapons or handling bombs.

Widgery's findings were based on inconclusive reports of forensic tests carried out after the massacre, purporting show the deceased had been in contact with explosives. However, last year Dr John Martin, the forensic scientist who carried out the original tests on the victim's bodies, said he now believed the results were erroneous. “I now believe that where a test proved positive... this could have resulted... from contamination from other sources such as motor exhausts, which at that time were not fully evident,” Martin said.



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