

British prime minister apologizes for 1971 Belfast killings

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John Teggart, son of Daniel Teggart, speaks, as he attends a news conference after listening to the findings of the report on the fatal shootings of 10 people in the Ballymurphy area of Belfast in 1971 that involved the British Army [Clodagh Kilcoyne/Reuters]

London, May 13 (RHC)-- British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has apologized “unreservedly” on behalf of the government for the deaths of 10 innocent people killed in a 1971 incident in Belfast during a British Army operation. The killings occurred as the British Army confronted protesters during the early days of the sectarian conflict that became known as The Troubles.

A judge-led inquiry on Tuesday found that British soldiers unjustifiably shot or used disproportionate force in the deaths of nine of the 10 people killed in the incident, which sparked a surge of sectarian violence.

High Court Justice Siobhan Keegan ruled that all of the victims were “entirely innocent” and were not engaged in a paramilitary activity at the time they were shot. The dead included a mother of eight, a Catholic priest and a World War II veteran.

Their families had fought for decades for a new inquiry to clear the names of their loved ones after earlier inquests proved inconclusive, raising suggestions that the victims were somehow responsible for the shootings.

"The prime minister apologised unreservedly on behalf of the UK government for the events that took place in Ballymurphy and the huge anguish that the lengthy pursuit of truth has caused the families of those killed," a spokesman for Johnson said on Wednesday, following a call between the prime minister and Northern Ireland's first and deputy first ministers.

The deaths over a three-day period of disorder in the Ballymurphy area of Belfast – a sprawling housing estate of Catholics who opposed British rule – occurred in the days after the introduction of internment without trial for suspected fighters triggered disorder on the streets.

Father Hugh Mullan, a 38-year-old priest who was among the 10 who died, was helping an injured man and waving a white object before he was shot twice in the back, the inquiry found.

There was insufficient evidence to say whether the army was responsible for the death of one of the victims, John James McKerr. However, Justice Keegan said it was “shocking” that the state did not carry out a proper investigation into the deaths.

No one has been charged or convicted in connection with any of the deaths. The inquest was a fact-finding exercise and not a criminal trial.

Some 3,600 people were killed in the sectarian conflict between Irish Catholic nationalist fighters, pro-British Protestant “loyalist” paramilitaries and the British military that largely ended after a 1998 peace agreement.

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