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Local & National

307 killed in Troubles' second bloodiest year

Friday, December 29, 2006

In releasing its official documents under the 30-year rule, the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland has made more of the province's history available to researchers. Graham Bardgett reviews the year of 1976

The second heaviest year for casualties in the Troubles, 1976, saw 307 killed - 220 of them civilians.

The IRA carried out the carnage of Kingsmills, there were the UVF murders in Co Armagh, and there was the assassination of the British Ambassador to Ireland in Dublin, Christopher Ewart Biggs.






Of the 307 dead, 13 were regular soldiers and 16 in the UDR, together with 24 officers in the RUC. Republican groups lost 17 members, while loyalists lost 13. Republican activity resulted in 161 of the deaths, loyalists 127, the Army 14 and the RUC two.

In January, six members of two Catholic families were killed by the UVF in Co Armagh and 10 Protestant workers were shot dead by the IRA at Kingsmills, sparking a security crisis resulting in the SAS being deployed and extra troops flown in.

A month later, in February, republican prisoner Frank Stagg died in Wakefield Jail, in England, after a 62-day hunger strike, and the following month those convicted of paramilitary offences were deemed no longer eligible for special category status.

A message from Frank Stagg was read to a demonstration on the Falls Road on February 5, a week before his death.

At the rally Sinn Fein vice-president Maire Drumm said: "Frank Stagg's death will be revenged as all our

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martyrs' deaths have been by the soldiers of Oglagh na hEireann. If they send Frank Stagg home in a coffin I would expect the fighting men of Crossmaglen would send the SAS home in boxes. If Frank Stagg lives or dies the fight goes on. England is still the hangman of the world."

Maire Drumm was subsequently murdered by loyalist gunmen while a patient at the Mater Hospital.

After a brief recall of the Convention lasting only days, March witnessed its dissolution amid rowdy scenes at its final meeting.

July 1976 saw the IRA murder in Dublin of the British Ambassador to Ireland, Christopher Ewart-Biggs, and through the summer months, the UUP was criticised by other unionists for holding talks with the SDLP.

August was the month that the Peace People emerged following the deaths of the three Maguire children during an incident in west Belfast.

They died when a car driven by an IRA man who had been shot by soldiers careered into them.

The movement attracted tens of thousands of supporters at peace rallies.

That summer, Lord Faulkner announced his retirement from political life. Roy Mason replaced Merlyn Rees as Northern Ireland Secretary of State in September and the first IRA man sent to the Maze after the ending of special category status refused to wear prison uniform.

In November, Peace People leaders Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams were awarded the Nobel Prize for their work in trying to end the violence that was to continue for almost three decades to come.

That autumn, Kenneth Newman took over as Chief Constable of the RUC, with Jack Hermon as Assistant Chief Constable. There was systematic interrogation of terrorist suspects at Castlereagh and security policy dominated the agenda with police primacy over the Army coming to the fore.

The year closed, in December, with the Fair Employment Act being passed making it an offence to discriminate in employment on religious or political grounds. There were also strong words from the new Secretary of State Roy Mason, urging local politicians not to let devolution slip from their grasp.

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