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The Victims: The suffering continues

Tuesday, March 13, 2007

By Noel McAdam

Murder was only the start for many victims of the Troubles. After losing a loved one, the families left behind have found the road to recovery to be a long one, filled with further painful hurdles.

The overwhelming majority of victims killed in the Troubles were males. Some estimates put the figure as high as around 90%. They left behind them wives and partners and parents and children who, in turn, became victims.

But these victims were also survivors - or at some stage in their ghastly experiences, slowly made the hard transition from victim to survivor.

Yet, quite apart from their unspeakable grief, many of them faced further hurdles. Many authorities and organisations were ill-prepared to assist them. In many cases, there was only more heartache, not help.

The former interim Victims Commissioner, Bertha McDougall, has drawn attention to some of the forgotten victims. Here are three of their stories:

Mary regularly received death threats, both by word of mouth and on the telephone. She came from an area hostile to police and was married to police officer Colin.

The couple became aware they were being watched and followed on a number of occasions but Colin, though a policeman since the mid-1980s, was afraid that advising his superiors might only make matters worse.

Although he was seeing a psychologist, the full extent of Colin's illness, post traumatic stress disorder, only became apparent much later.

In 1988, he resigned from the RUC and did not apply for any pension. The couple moved to a remote rural property in the Republic. Eventually, their financial resources were expended, but they remained apprehensive that applying for assistance would mean revealing Colin's past.






Just two years later their son, who was still living in Belfast and under paramilitary threat, was shot dead. The threats had become a reality.

Colin and Mary withdrew further and closed themselves away from the world, still not claiming any benefits or seeing a doctor.

After some time, they were persuaded to see the former interim Victims Commissioner Bertha McDougall, who put them in contact with the Police Federation Rehabilitation Centre.

Now, they plan to move back to Northern Ireland, Mrs McDougall says: " It reinforces the message that post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is often not fully recognised or diagnosed at the time the trauma occurred, but resurfaces and requires treatment many years later."

Catherine still vividly recalls the hail of bullets striking the walls in the hallway of her home. She lay on the floor of the kitchen until the gunfire subsided, before running to a neighbour's house for help.

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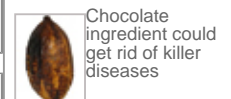
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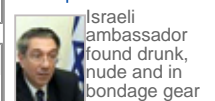
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For several weeks before the attack, Catherine was aware her husband seemed preoccupied and worried about something, although he reassured her nothing was the matter.

In retrospect, Catherine believes he may have received some sort of warnings or threats prior to his murder.

She has the highest regard for the young police officer who was first on the scene. However, she feels that the investigating detective team who called periodically were unsympathetic and insensitive.

In the aftermath of the attack, Catherine moved into her mother's house with her young children.

She feels she was badly treated and discriminated against by the Housing Executive in her attempts to get a suitable replacement dwelling.

Catherine was finally re-housed in accommodation that was in very poor condition and is aggrieved that she was left on her own to restore the property, without any real support.

Shortly after her husband's murder, Catherine was put on medication for her trauma. Some 30 years later, she is still nervous in certain circumstances and remains on medication.

Although her children were too young to remember what happened, they nevertheless missed growing up with two parents. Catherine also believes that her own hurt and anger after the murder impacted adversely on the children.

She received compensation but Catherine considers that she was treated with disdain and made to feel like a criminal by the Senior Counsel for the NIO.

She is aggrieved at the overall poor levels of compensation she and others received during the 1970s and at the inconsistency in the amounts allocated to different victims.

Catherine also feels that there is inconsistency, in that some categories of victim have their pensions taxed, while others do not.

Ann lost her husband when he was caught in a no-warning bomb on his way home from work in 1980. It had gone off prematurely.

Left with three young children aged five and under, Ann soon discovered the fact that her family is of mixed religious and ethnic background compounded her problems. She has had to move house 18 times in 10 years after suffering repeated racist abuse. In one attack, the family's car was damaged.

Ann suffers from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and all three daughters continue to have health problems. There is now a seven-year-old grandchild also.

Though they have now found an area they consider reasonably safe, the family have been unable to make any headway in their attempts to get Housing Executive accommodation.

Under existing Housing Executive criteria, Ann and her family fall a long way short of the points total they need.

Former interim Victims Commissioner Mrs McDougall says the fact that Ann and her family were (and still are) victims of the Troubles is not taken into account per se in the Housing Executive criteria or scoring.

Nor do the problems of mixed religious and ethnic background appear to have been factored in. Ann feels badly let down by 'the system' as she believes that she is still suffering and that the public sector lacks sympathy, flexibility and understanding.

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