



Northern
Ireland
Office

Oral Ministerial Statement

10 JANUARY 2013

SECRETARY OF STATE - STATEMENT TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS FLAGS PROTEST IN NORTHERN IRELAND

With permission Mr Speaker I would like to make a statement about events in Northern Ireland.

Terrorist attack

Before updating the House on the recent protests and disorder, I wish to report on an attempted terrorist attack.

On 30 December an officer of the Police Service of Northern Ireland discovered an improvised explosive device attached to the underneath of his car shortly before he was due to drive his wife and family to Sunday lunch.

The IED was viable and were it not for the alertness of the officer in checking his car, it is highly likely that he and his family would all have lost their lives.

This despicable attack bears the hallmarks of the so-called dissident republicans and looks to be the latest example of the relentless attempts these groupings make to try to murder police officers.

It underlines the need for continued vigilance.

And the Government will continue to do everything it can to help the PSNI combat the terrorist threat in Northern Ireland.

The House should also be aware that two individuals have been charged in relation to the murder of prison officer David Black.

Riots

Turning to the disturbances in Belfast and other parts of Northern Ireland ...

... since I last reported to the House on 11th Dec, protests over the flying of the Union Flag at Belfast City Hall have continued with only sporadic respite over Christmas.

While many of these have been peaceful, even these have seen roads blocked and daily life disrupted.

And a significant number of protests have led to serious disorder, mainly concentrated in East Belfast.

While thankfully there were no significant public order incidents last night the violence during the preceding six days, saw masonry, bricks, fireworks and petrol bombs thrown at the police and in one instance, shots were fired,

Police vehicles have been attacked with sledge-hammers.

In total 66 police officers have been injured since these protests first began.

Water cannon and AEP rounds were discharged on 5th and 7th January.

Threats and intimidation against elected representatives continue, with the office of the Hon Member for East Belfast still the subject of daily intimidation.

This intimidation and lawless violence is unacceptable and it is intolerable.

The Government condemns those responsible in the strongest possible terms.

We reiterate our full support for the Chief Constable and his officers in their efforts to maintain law and order.

And we pay tribute to the bravery and professionalism of PSNI officers who put their personal safety on the line every day to keep people in Northern Ireland safe and secure.

According to the Chief Constable, senior individual members of the Ulster Volunteer Force are involved in orchestrating the violence ... though in his view it's not being sanctioned by the leadership of that group.

Since 3 December, 107 people have been arrested and 82 have been charged with various offences.

The perpetrators of this violence should be in no doubt...as the Chief Constable made clear on Monday ... you will face the full rigour of the law.

And those who continue to organise these protests and engage in violence really need to ask themselves what it is they think they're achieving.

The idea that hurling bricks at police officers is somehow defending the Union Flag or protecting Britishness is incomprehensible.

These people are not defending our national flag ... they are dishonouring our national flag and our country.

They are being reckless with the peace process and all it's delivered.

And the damage they are inflicting on Northern Ireland's economy must be considerable.

Huge efforts have been made in recent years to project a modern, confident, outward looking Northern Ireland that's a great place to do business.

But the pictures beaming round the world of riots and disorder make it far far harder to compete in the global race for inward investment.

Jobs and livelihoods are under threat.

So it's essential that these protests and this violence stop now.

Since these disturbances began I have been in regular contact with the Chief Constable, the First and deputy First Ministers, the Justice Minister and other political leaders.

The Northern Ireland political parties need to work together to find a way forward.

It shouldn't be impossible to find a solution which sees decisions on flags made in a way which respects different views and takes into account the different traditions and identities present in today's Northern Ireland.

But for that to happen the issue needs to come off the streets to allow local politicians and community leaders the space to sit round a table and engage in constructive dialogue.

Mr Speaker ... I've used recent weeks to highlight the urgent need to make progress on addressing the underlying divisions within the community in Northern Ireland which can make decisions on issues like flags so fraught with tension.

On many occasions, Northern Ireland's political leaders have expressed their commitment to building a shared society free from the sectarian division.

It's also a theme to which I and my predecessor, along with the Prime Minister, have returned many times.

So much has been achieved in the 20 years since the peace process really got underway.

The overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland can lead their lives with a normality and a freedom from fear which would have been impossible back in the dark days of the Troubles.

But we all need to acknowledge that the process isn't finished and the stability delivered by the Belfast Agreement should never be taken for granted.

For some, sectarian divisions remain deeply entrenched and it is time for bold moves by Northern Ireland's political leadership to address them.

We need to build a genuinely shared future for everyone in Northern Ireland.

It won't be easy but Northern Ireland's political leadership have already shown themselves capable of taking difficult decisions in order to make progress.

They have fixed tougher problems than the ones we are discussing today.

I believe that they can rise to this challenge as they have to so many others over the last two decades.

And the UK Government stands ready to work with them in their efforts to deliver a better and more cohesive future for Northern Ireland.

ENDS