

Riots in Belfast

Care of the Homeless and Displaced

1. As a result of the riots and their immediate aftermath over 500 houses were destroyed or so damaged as to be temporarily uninhabitable. Further, substantial numbers of people whose homes were not damaged fled in fear. At the peak of the emergency some 5,000 to 6,000 people were estimated to be homeless or displaced, preponderantly (though not exclusively) in Roman Catholic areas of the City.
2. About half of these (between 2,000 and 3,000) were given temporary shelter in rest centres established by voluntary organisations associated mainly with the various churches. Schools, church-halls and other buildings were utilized for the purpose. Most of the remainder found temporary accommodation with friends or relations or other persons with room to spare in their own homes; but an unknown number - possibly 4/500 - left Northern Ireland for the Republic or elsewhere.
3. With the return of more settled conditions, many of the displaced (as distinct from the homeless) have left rest centres and billets to go back home. Less than 150 people (from a peak of nearly 3,000) are now sleeping in centres, most of which have closed. Many billetees have also returned home, but no precise figures are available.
4. Immediate Steps

Difficulties of access behind the barricades and other problems of communication made it almost impossible to frame an immediate assessment of the size of the problem or the exact location of all the rest centres. Nevertheless, very substantial quantities of camp-beds, blankets, mattresses and medical supplies were supplied by Government sources (the Hospitals Authority and the Ministry of Home Affairs) from the onset of the emergency and were distributed to rest centres by the local welfare authorities concerned (Belfast and Antrim). The welfare authorities also supplied food not only for people living in rest centres but for large numbers billeted in private houses who were fed at these centres. Within some 48 hours of the start of the riots, the immediate needs of the homeless or displaced for shelter, food and clothing had been met in these and other ways. Medical and nursing services were also arranged, at first somewhat patchily but within a few days systematically, and welfare staff were stationed at the main centres.

5. Co-ordination and Direction of Remedial Measures

As soon as access could be gained, senior officials of the Ministry of Health and Social Services made a tour of the main rest centres to assess the problems and the further measures needed to deal with them. On the following day the Ministry set up a committee to co-ordinate and direct arrangements for the care of the homeless and displaced. This committee includes representatives of the Government Departments concerned, of the statutory health and welfare services and of the voluntary bodies. It meets regularly and its scope has now been extended to include representatives of the housing authorities. It was agreed at the committee's first meeting, on the unanimous advice of all concerned, that neither Government nor the statutory bodies should attempt to assume control of the voluntary rest centres or billets in the present highly-charged situation, but that they should play an essentially supportive role.

6. The following paragraphs outline the main measures which have already been taken or are in train.

7. Ascertainment of Damaged Property

The public health inspectors of Belfast Health Authority have undertaken a detailed survey of damage to houses, which has now been completed and shows that -

- 168 houses require demolition
- 62 houses require major repair
- 293 houses require minor repair

Total 523 houses destroyed or temporarily uninhabitable

The location of all these houses is known and the information has been circulated widely to all bodies concerned.

8. Ascertainment of Numbers of Persons Affected

Simultaneously social workers of the welfare authorities - specially re-inforced for the purpose - have undertaken a detailed survey of the numbers and needs of persons in rest centres or billets. This survey will be completed today and will be collated with the information under (7) above. It will provide not only details of the homeless but details of persons unwilling to return to their homes. The present estimate - which is thought to be fairly accurate - is that there are now 150 people in rest centres and 4,200 in billets.

9. Supplementary Benefits

The Supplementary Benefits Commission set up almost immediately temporary offices at all the main centres to deal with urgent financial needs. Once these had been met the Commission decided, over and above normal measures -

- (a) to make special discretionary grants to persons accommodated in billets to cover additional expenses necessarily incurred by the household, including the cost of food;
- (b) to pay resettlement grants up to £150 to all persons (whether entitled to Supplementary Benefit or not) who are willing to move to new accommodation but need help in refurnishing.

10. Other Financial Measures

- (a) Stocks of forms for claims for compensation for malicious damage to property or malicious injury have been widely distributed. The Ministry of Finance has set up special offices to make advances on foot of such claims to owners of small businesses to enable them to restock or resume trading.
- (b) Details of a scheme for Government loans to the homeless or displaced who wish to buy houses on Building Society mortgage or under the Small Dwellings Acquisition Act and need help with initial deposits are now being worked out and will probably be announced today.
- (c) The Government has decided to make a special extra-statutory grant of £50,000 to provide compensation for individuals who have suffered financial loss or hardship because of the emergency and whose needs are not covered by any of the statutory services or other schemes already announced. This sum will be distributed through voluntary bodies and will meet claims which lie outside the scope of Government machinery.

11. Temporary Housing

The Ministry of Development, in co-operation with the housing authorities concerned, is organising the provision of temporary housing in caravans and pre-fabricated wooden buildings until such time as permanent housing can be made available. The main problem is not the supply of caravans or pre-fabricated dwellings but the selection and preparation of suitable sites. Several sites, however, have now been earmarked and are being got ready. The first caravans or pre-fabricated houses will be in place this weekend, and it is hoped to achieve a rapid build-up within the next two to three weeks. Admission to this accommodation will be from the lists of homeless and displaced persons compiled by welfare authorities under (8) above.

12. The Ministry of Development and the housing authorities are also examining the question of urgent repair of damaged houses which can be made habitable. Belfast Corporation has offered to buy and repair damaged houses in private ownership.

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