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Issued by the NORTHERN IRELAND INFORMATION SERVICE
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PRESS RELEASE

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER (MR BRIAN FAULKNER) AT STORMONT ON TUESDAY,
7 MARCH 1972, ON THE EXPLOSION IN THE ABERCORN RESTAURANT

Last Saturday's tragic event has been reported throughout the world, and I need only recite the facts very briefly today. At 4.28 pm an anonymous person called the operator at Telephone House and stated that a bomb, due to go off in five minutes, had been planted in Castle Lane. One minute later, before its whereabouts was known and before the security forces could move into the area, a bomb of approximately 5 lbs exploded on the ground floor of the Abercorn restaurant. As a result two young women were killed and 136 other people were injured. Of those injured 27 are still in hospital, many of them maimed for life.

Three days after the event there remains with us all a feeling of immense sorrow, and with this a deep compassion for the injured and the bereaved. I extend the sympathy of the whole House to those who have already suffered, as well as to those who will continue to suffer in the months and years ahead; and I express our heartfelt thanks to the ambulance men, the members of the public, the Army and the Police, the doctors and the nurses, who all played their part in reducing as far as humanly possible the scale of the disaster.

And yet after experiencing something of the new dimensions of terrorism there is the danger of a lapse from a sense of outrage into feelings of despair. I think this would be quite wrong. There is an important lesson to be learnt from the week-end's events and the first thing is to get them in perspective. Any illusion that we were not at war with the enemies of society must by now have been dispelled, and we may as well face the facts. We are right to make "business as usual" our motto, but this does not mean that we can let our defences down. In the battle for survival against the terrorist there are important achievements to report and we need to build on them. What are these achievements?

During the past three months the security forces have raided no less than eleven premises where bombs and materials for making bombs have been found, all but one of these being in Belfast. During the same period several members of the IRA with special expertise in this field have been captured and both factions are now short of experienced handlers of explosives. Nevertheless large thefts of gelignite in

the Irish Republic continue to cause concern and quantities are still crossing the border. There is also evidence of some bombs being manufactured in the South. The Government of the Irish Republic, whose spokesmen condemn the outrages we have had to suffer for so long, would be much better employed in cutting down this lethal traffic, and I hope that the effects of laxity in doing so will be apparent to all. In the absence of help where it is most needed the security forces here are doing magnificent work. During the past three months, although there have been 148 explosions in Belfast, no less than 67 explosive devices have been neutralized. In the rest of Northern Ireland the number of explosions was 218 and the number of devices neutralized was 69. We all owe a debt to the dedicated bomb disposal squads who have marked up these successes.

Nor should we forget the patient and persistent work of the police in bringing the perpetrators of bomb attacks to justice. We may have short memories, and it is easy to record attacks when they occur and to ignore the follow-up afterwards. During the past 14 months the police have made 62 detections in Belfast involving the planting or possession of explosives. Some of these have involved long, difficult and often dangerous enquiries. In other cases the bombers have been caught red-handed, and only last Saturday morning two were shot, one fatally, as they were igniting a bomb at Apollo Road, Belfast.

I should add that already since the beginning of this year 39 people have been sentenced for firearms or explosives offences.

I know that where a particularly serious outbreak occurs people often ask why the police and Army were not there to prevent it. Honourable Members will gather from what I have just said that the security forces are achieving much more than they are sometimes given credit for. We would all like to see more policemen on the beat. They are re-assuring to the public and their presence is a deterrent to the wrongdoer. But a policeman in uniform is not always the answer to the silent bomber or the watchful gunman; for this reason much of the important work in the city is being done unknown to the public by police in plain clothes.

But it is a question of numbers. The strength of the RUC now stands at 4,082. Recruits are coming in, but more are wanted. The RUC Reserve is also rapidly increasing its numbers. The original ceiling of 1,500 has now been reached and the total strength of the force is 1,588, of whom 736 are serving in Greater Belfast. The new ceiling is 2,500, and I should like to urge once again that able-bodied men in employment who really want to throw their weight behind the regular police and army should offer the community their part-time services.

I should also like to announce a further increase in strength to the police. The Police Authority recently decided to offer to RUC Reservists the opportunity of performing full-time service during the present emergency. The regulations setting up this new category were made last week and engagement of full-time reservists is now starting. They will be used primarily for the protection of police stations and they will, therefore, be able to relieve the regular police for other duties. I hope that one early result of this will be to make more regular members of the RUC available for beat duty in Belfast.

Alongside the police and the regular Army stands the UDR. The strength of the regiment rose from 6,648 to 7,749 between the 1 January and 1 March this year in spite of an all-out attack by the IRA to break the morale of the force by intimidation and assassination. In fact these very attacks are proof that the IRA regard a strong UDR as one of the greatest dangers to their continued existence. I hope we shall see the UDR attain its new target of 10,000 very soon. Is there any other way in which manpower can be mobilized, especially for the protection of the centre of Belfast? I believe there is: not in the streets, but in shops, restaurants and other buildings to which the public have access.

Many business proprietors have already taken measures to provide security for their customers by various means in order to reduce the risk of the surreptitious bomb or incendiary device being planted. Unfortunately this is not always done and I would entreat all those who have not so far taken adequate precautions to do so as expeditiously as possible.

Generally speaking a bomb threat materialises in one of three ways -

- (i) Someone, generally armed, plants a bomb, and as he does so, gives warning;
- (ii) A warning is received by 'phone or some other means, that a bomb has been placed and that there is a certain time to "get out";
- (iii) A suspicious object such as a parcel, brief case, box or such like, is discovered.

Each establishment should have a well-practised drill which can be put into operation immediately and by which information can be passed quickly to persons in the building, the RUC or the Army.

The Security Forces are doing everything possible to deal with bomb threats, but all such action must be complemented by an equal effort on the part of the civilian population, whether they be owners of premises or members of the general public.

I would like to inculcate a greater awareness among all sections of the business

community of the immense value of self-protection measures.

In particular, the following countermeasures are considered useful:

- (i) Limit the number of entry points to all premises.
- (ii) Scrutinise all persons entering and leaving.
- (iii) Check all handbags, suitcases and overcoats, etc, carried by customers.

The Lord Mayor of Belfast came to see me yesterday not only to express his concern but to find out whether there was any way in which he could lead the citizens of Belfast towards a better security situation in the City. He has agreed to call a meeting with representatives of business and commercial interests with a view to making certain that all are furnished with the most up-to-date information and that all are in a position fully to co-operate on this vital matter.

I welcome his initiative. The Government and the Security Authorities will involve themselves fully in the discussion. The meeting will be arranged in the immediate future.

I want to stress again how vitally important it is that people with information to give should come forward with it. I refer not only to information about last Saturday's explosion but also to any piece of evidence which anyone may have about any incident in the present campaign.

There must be people in the City of Belfast and elsewhere in Northern Ireland who know who these bombers are, who know something of their plans and who know details of their movements and activities. While I fully appreciate the dangerous situation in which such people may be I am convinced that some of them could pass on information which would help remove this terrible evil from our midst. To do so is not to take political "sides" in any way - the menace to the public which we are facing is something completely outside the realm of politics. The bombers and their henchmen are not so much damaging political Parties or political institutions, but are taking innocent lives and shattering innocent lives often at random. There can be no peace, no worth-while progress until their evil is removed from the whole community.