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RUC PRESS CONFERENCE

8 April 1987

Re: Marley Funeral

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(detail ordered) pg.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I called this press conference today to give us the opportunity to outline to you as best we can the circumstances of these past few days and before I invite you to address your questions to me I would like to make one or two observations and I would ask you that you give them the credence which I believe they are entitled to receive.

Lawrence Marley, who was buried today, was a terrorist. Lawrence Marley was murdered by terrorists. Many other terrorists in these past few weeks have been similarly murdered. The circumstances of the past three days were regrettable, regrettable to us and to the relatives of the deceased and particularly his immediate family and we in the RUC understand too well that grief which they experienced as family and relatives and we sympathise with them. Too many members of our force have suffered that same grief. We have that sympathy and the regret that events did transpire as they did initially and continually as a result of outside interference and sinister elements. There was no desire on the part of the police, any police officer, to further the suffering and anguish of those relations. I would wish to make it clear also that the Catholic Church in Belfast at all levels have shown a deep concern, over the funeral and have mediated in all possible ways in the interest of the family and the people of that area. They conducted a dialogue with the police responsibly and with great care and concern by a genuine and proper desire to have this problem resolved and I express to them my very deep appreciation. I would wish to make a point: any Londonderry city and in Belfast, two separate diocese, it has been recognised and made very clear that diocesan regulations forbid paramilitary displays of force in churches and their precepts. I wish to make it equally clear that the law of the country also forbids those displays and it is right that both laws, spiritual and temporal, receive their respect

and their due in Church and State and that that law is maintained and, where necessary, enforced. I would wish to make it quite clear that the cause of the trouble in the past three days rests fairly and squarely on Provisional Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA. This is not a unique situation: there are ample precedents for their conduct. We can remember the Staggs funeral, the Frances Hughes funeral where they were manipulated in the most macabre way to exploit and propagandise their own cause. They used the deaths of terrorists to achieve their own aims. More recently, a murdered man was murdered so that his remains could be used as a lure to murder other human beings. Following that funeral they desecrated a church. There is ample precedent for their conduct in these past three days. Today's funeral could have passed off peacefully with no trouble on Monday last, as arranged and as had been agreed by the family, the Marley family, with the police, had it not been for that quite sinister involvement by Provisional Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA. The consequences, in terms of violence and alienation of the community, disruption of the police function in the general service of the total community, have been quite disastrous. The number of incidents which have occurred in these past three days, efforts to disrupt the police and to allow them to pursue their aims at a paramilitary funeral with weapons and paramilitary uniforms have been frustrated. I would not wish to say any more at this time because I know you have questions to address to me. I would say that I have with me the Assistant Chief Constable from Belfast who has just recently returned from North Belfast and the Divisional Commander of that area. I welcome your questions.

Reporter:

Sir John, you say that the Catholic Church does not support paramilitary displays. Bishop Edward Daly issued a statement after the Lawrence Marley funeral in which he also referred to what he thought was the unnecessarily heavy police presence at that funeral.

Sir John Hermon:

Yes he did, and I respect what he said. I will say that it was after very careful consideration by the Commanders on the ground with my full support that they had that deployment in strength. Because you have also seen on occasions not in East and West Belfast where they endeavoured to take a distanced approach hoping that those people would acknowledge the dignity of the funeral and they exploited it by a paramilitary show of strength by a production of very sinister weapons in the firing of volleys. Those weapons were seized, people were arrested and charged. And we have found, sadly, that when we did adopt a tactic of standing back and giving those people the opportunity to conduct their funerals and bury their dead within the law, that they breached it and it was with great regret that we had to change our style.

Reporter:

What do you say to Fr. Denis Faul's assertion that your heavy police presence at such funerals is counterproductive and is driving people into the ranks of the IRA?

Sir John Hermon:

I think there is that risk. We have a total community to police and the law to maintain. I would say this, that all the approaches towards resolving this problem by very responsible people were seemingly directed to the RUC. And when I asked why they did not direct similar requests to Provisional IRA and PIRA, the remark was "they are of the damned and they will give nothing".

Reporter:

Chief Constable, what did the RUC agree with the Marley family about the funeral?

Sir John Hermon:

I would like the Assistant Chief Constable, Belfast, to answer that question.

Assistant Chief  
Constable Steenson

There were actually three demands or three requests made to us on Monday. One was that we should leave the path clear from the front of the house right down to where the hearse would be. And secondly, there was a request that we would not flank the hearse, and the third request was that we would not flank the coffin. We were given guarantees that there would be no question of any paramilitary trappings, that there be three men on each side of the coffin and then if we would take up position behind that. We acceded to those requests right at the beginning of the week so I would endorse fully what our Chief Constable has said, I see absolutely no reason from a police point of view, or indeed any other point of view, why that funeral could not have gone ahead on the Monday as planned.

Reporter:

What changed on Monday? What was different when you got to the scene on Monday?

Assistant Chief  
Constable Steenson

What happened on Monday was this. Whenever the coffin was being brought out, there was a lull and then there was a rush made towards the police lines with exactly the same thing on the Tuesday. And I am satisfied from what I observed by being

there that that was totally orchestrated to prevent the funeral from taking place. This was clear because everything was peaceful, everything was calm, we had already negotiated with the clergy who were there and we had given undertakings and I had told the clergyman that I would be right there with him at the front to ensure that if there was any fear on the part of the Marley family, there would be no police interference and that was the position.

Sir John Hermon:

Let it read that the short answer was that PIRA and Sinn Fein took command of the situation.

Reporter:

Mr. Steenson could we ask you, though, was there any evidence of a paramilitary funeral, any paramilitary trappings or anything there which constituted paramilitary trapping to realise the situation in which you instituted for two days of the funeral?

Sir John Hermon:

Mr. Nally, I can tell you from Headquarters that we had ample intelligence of the intent of the Provisional IRA and Provisional Sinn Fein and the directions were given accordingly.

Reporter:

Ample intelligence about what? What type of intelligence was that?

Sir John Hermon:

The intelligence was that the Provisional IRA and Provisional Sinn Fein were going to have a show of strength and have a paramilitary display of what they

considered to be their territory and when they were frustrated then they created a propaganda dimension. I can give you that totally assured.

Reporter: Do you accept that they then have gained the propaganda terms for saying that?

Sir John Hermon: We are in the business of applying the law. Other agencies in the community tend to be in the business of propaganda. If they have, I would hope that reasonable people will understand what their intent was.

Reporter: Mr. Hermon, you mention about propaganda, but why do you feel its necessary to call a press conference this afternoon to justify the police presence these last few days?

Sir John Hermon: I would have said that we are providing a service to the media to state the facts.

Reporter: Chief Constable, what do you say to those people who live in Britain and the United States who see pictures of an allegedly unbiased police force batoning people at a man's funeral?

Sir John Hermon: I think Mr. Steenson, who was at the funeral, could answer that.

Assistant Chief Constable Steenson: A very good question. If I could just recount what exactly happened there. We were standing observing the crowd. There were a number of sections of the crowd, whenever the jostling started, we were

pushed and kicked and then the bricks started to be thrown and from there on we had to take action to defend ourselves because we had a policewoman who was injured and we have a number of other officers who have been injured. That simply was the case, we had to protect ourselves and that was why the action was taken.

Reporter:

But if I could readdress the question to the Chief Constable, you were there to make sure that Mr. Marley could not be buried the way the people around the coffin wanted him buried.

Sir John Hermon:

In the way that the paramilitaries and subversives wished to have him buried you are quite right.

Reporter:

And are you quite satisfied that those were not the wishes of the Marley family?

Sir John Hermon:

Certainly at the outset when the negotiations took place at the beginning, they were not the wishes of the Marley family.

Reporter:

Was there a change in emphasis then from the Marley family?

Sir John Hermon:

I must leave that to a further inquiry. We are aware of the factual position. We had arranged for a peaceful funeral and we had hoped for, and intelligence told us, that that was not the intention of the Provisional IRA.

Reporter: Mr. Steenson could I ask you, did the presence of a Tricolour on the coffin constitute a paramilitary trapping in your way of thinking?

Assistant Chief Constable Steenson: Certainly not. Not in the way it was exhibited. Certainly if it had been in some other area that may have been a different case but not where it was. There was absolutely no question of a likelihood of a breach of the peace through the Tricolour being exhibited in that particular area.

Reporter: So can I further ask you then, if that's your viewpoint, why did you decide then to behave accordingly if in fact that was the only potential outpouring of a trapping of paramilitary significance?

Assistant Chief Constable Steenson: Sorry Mr. Nally, what do you mean "why did you behave accordingly"? We were there, as I have already explained, for two purposes: (i) to preserve the peace, to ensure that there was no breach of the peace, and secondly to ensure that acting on intelligence we'd had that that did not come to fruition. And we achieved that.

Reporter: But why did you step back today?

Assistant Chief Constable Steenson: But we didn't step back today any more than any other day Mr. Nally. As soon as the request was made to leave a little more space at the front of the house, which I have already gone over, nothing changed from that, we did that. That takes me back to what I've mentioned

earlier, there was no reason in the world why that funeral could not have proceeded on Monday morning. Absolutely none.

Reporter: Chief Constable, I wonder could I ask you something on the Public Order Act.

Sir John Hermon: Within the context of the events of the past few days.

Reporter: Some cynical people in the community might suggest that this is the RUC demonstrating how they can crack heads in the Catholic community as well as in the Protestant community.

Sir John Hermon: I would accept that some cynical people would be doing that.

Reporter: And that there is no suggestion that this is true.

Sir John Hermon: There is no substance or truth to that, I give you that reassured.

Reporter: And on the Public Order Act there have been marches in Republican areas in the last couple of nights which have apparently gone unchallenged by the RUC.

Sir John Hermon: There are circumstances pertaining to these past few nights where it was not our desire to have any unnecessary confrontation in areas where there was no danger of a breach to the peace.

Reporter: Will you be prosecuting the organisers of those marches?

Sir John Hermon:

That's a matter for the future.

Reporter:

You mentioned at the beginning that terrorists were killing terrorists and you mentioned that the last several days and prior to that there has apparently been an increase in the level of violent activity. How do you account for that, Sir, is it terrorist killing terrorist? What accounts for the increase in the number of incidents this year to date?

Sir John Hermon:

I think, in fact I know, that it has been because of the enhanced level of activity by the Provisional IRA after their quite disastrous showing in the election in the South of Ireland. They are trying to placate their more militant members by being even more vicious in their murdering and their bombing. And they are trying to redeem their losses in that election and that is a careful assessment of the Chief Constable.

Reporter:

You are assessing then that the increase in violent activity here is to counter a political loss elsewhere?

Sir John Hermon:

Yes, because there is a very considerable division and split within Provisional Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA at this time, and this is an effort, by escalating the level of violence such as murders, bombings and shootings, to placate the more extreme elements and prevent a continuing drift in Republican Sinn Fein.

Reporter:

Sir John, the intelligence you said you had of their intentions with regard to the funeral, did that intelligence also carry a motive? Would that answer you've just given extend to this funeral, that they made a very large propaganda exercise out of it. Do you think it was basically a need to react after the very strong statement from Bishop Edward Daly after the Londonderry funeral?

Sir John Hermon:

I don't think it had anything to do with any particular statement. I think it was related to their very clear stance in relation to their subversive, paramilitary parades and funerals of late and where they had expressed the right to bury their dead terrorists with pomp and ceremony and they were endeavouring to impose their will on a community and on the law, we had to protect that law. And I am satisfied beyond any doubt that this was an endeavour to achieve a paramilitary funeral to the detriment of the rule of law.

Reporter:

Chief Constable, just to clear up something, when Mr. Steenson claimed an arrangement with the Marley family, were police aware at that time of the intelligence that the IRA were going to act like this.

Sir John Hermon

We were aware of that possibility from the previous Friday night and had taken police precautions to ensure that they did not preempt us in any way. Yes we were, and

that did not in any way detract from our duty to endeavour to have a peaceful funeral.

Reporter:

Do you accept the IRA claim that they fired a volley of shots over the memorial in honour of him?

Sir John Hermon:

I don't accept or reject the terrorists' claims because very often they are on the grounds of expediency or presentational terms.

Reporter:

In the light of the events of the last few days and today Chief Constable, will there be changes in policing attitudes towards funerals.

Sir John Hermon:

I would sincerely hope that the change will take place in the minds of the people who have caused such anguish and grief and recognise that the only way forward is within the law. We will police this community as we must do to maintain the rule of law. Sometimes it is regrettable that we have to do things and I can tell you that every police officer involved in these past three days got no satisfaction having to perform their duty in that way. It was an abhorrence to every one of us.

Reporter:

Chief Constable, you've spoken of alienation as being quite disastrous arising from the last few days in Northern Ireland. Would you care to quantify what that means in the nationalist Catholic community. Would you have any assessment of it.

Sir John Hermon:

No, I think you could easily quantify it by saying that those people of the minority and majority communities who are sensible, law abiding and aware and will not in any way be intruded. It will be those people who are too open to prejudiced views and who indeed are the sufferers of the history of their own environment.

Reporter:

What do you say, Chief Constable, to all the, what you would deem to be, normally responsible voices in the nationalist Catholic community who have condemned and branded as heavy-handed the behaviour of the police in these particular circumstances - people like John Hume, people like Fr. Faul, other priests etc., you would deem them as normal, respectable voices.

Sir John Hermon:

I respect their view. I would ask people who listen to them to address themselves to the question 'what would inevitably have happened had we taken a different stance. We would today have been criticised by other elements in the community for being soft in allowing a terrorist organisation to flaunt their weapons and their ascendancy within this community. I promise you the return on that would have been equally strong.

Reporter:

How do you answer Chief Constable when people say Marley was shot by the UVF and that at the last UVF funeral, the Bingham funeral in September in another part of North Belfast, passed off very differently with paramilitary trappings and no police intervention.

Sir John Hermon:

Mr. Steenson will answer that. May I say before he does that one of the reasons for the heavy police presence is directly because of the question which was asked and which I believe Mr. Steenson will address.

Assistant Chief  
Constable Steenson:

Yes, I was present at that funeral and may I say this: I was given what was said to be a cast iron guarantee that there would be no paramilitary trappings, there would be no display to indicate any association with an illegal organisation. Now, there was a complete loss of faith there. I was totally let down. That may be part of the reason for today's strife to ensure that, when we're dealing with illegal organisations, we have learned, perhaps learned slowly, but have learned that we just cannot take their word and that certainly was the case at that particular funeral.

Reporter:

But Chief Constable, with respect, can you imagine the reaction of nationalists listening to that on television and radio tonight, that a Catholic funeral was policed in what they see as a heavy-handed manner, because the UVF told the lies.

Sir John Hermon:

I'm sorry, what the Assistant Chief Constable said very clearly was that there had been an agreement, as had been in the Marley funeral by the relatives, an agreement as to how the funeral would be conducted. It was breached at a previous funeral as with many other Provisional IRA funerals so in fact I do not consider that aspect is relevant.

Reporter: Chief Constable, you said you had specific intelligence about the intentions of the IRA to have some form of paramilitaryism exposed on the occasion. But on another occasion you said to another question that you were aware of the possibility of this. Now which is it, you had the specific intelligence or were you aware of the possibility of it?

Sir John Hermon: The possibility relating to the dialogue with the family. We knew precisely what PIRA intended.

Reporter: What was that precisely? Was it firing of shots or what?

Sir John Hermon: Follow the attempts in Londonderry over the previous funeral, follow the precedents of many other terrorist funerals and you've got your answer.

Reporter: Were you working on a hunch or had you specific information?

Sir John Hermon: Mr. Nally I've given you an answer. And I'm telling you that's the only answer you're going to get. Respect the integrity of that answer.

Reporter: Surely you had information on previous occasions, why didn't you act on it?

Sir John Hermon: Because we had it on previous occasions but were given certain guarantees in certain circumstances that there would be no such display, and we endeavoured to allow that to be honoured. They were not

honoured, we have realised from hard experience that we cannot trust the word of terrorists or paramilitaries.

Reporter:

Chief Constable, surely there was a middle way in this funeral, was it necessary for the police lines to be so close to the front door of the Marley home and in that narrow pathway? Surely everything you had wanted to see could have been seen from just a few feet back.

Assistant Chief  
Constable Steenson:

With respect we went close to the Marley home, the door of the Marley home, we were in that patio in the front of the house but certainly not right up close to the front of the house.

Reporter:

But from the view of an outsider, knowing nothing about police tactics, to me you were right in the front of everything.

Assistant Chief  
Constable Steenson:

Yes, were in the front area, but not as close as you're suggesting. We weren't right up at the front door of the house.

Reporter:

But couldn't you have seen everything you wanted to see from, say, where the hearse was parked?

Assistant Chief  
Constable Steenson:

Of course we could see everything but if, in the event of a paramilitary display, one's got to be in a position to be able to take the necessary action to prevent that. You couldn't do that if you were some distance away. That's partly the reason for being as close as we were.

Sir John Hermon:

On Mr. Steenson's point, you again have ample precedent for paramilitaries and terrorists to hide behind women and children and innocent mourners which makes it almost impossible for us and they then have achieved their purpose, and I think that really does answer your question satisfactorily. It is regrettable, but necessary.

Reporter:

Chief Constable, what was your latest information immediately before you came in the room, that Marley is now buried? What was the situation?

Sir John Hermon:

The cortege was moving up the Falls Road.

Reporter:

Chief Constable, there has been a very considerable upsurge in IRA violence in recent weeks in Belfast given that in two years it had almost abated during that period. What's your reaction to that upsurge?

Sir John Hermon:

We have identified what we know to be the reason. The Provisional IRA talk about the armalite and the ballot box and they will use either to their own benefit. They certainly will use the ballot box to destroy the democratic process as they will use the armalite to destroy the democratic process. They are instruments which they are prepared to use at their whim to meet their desires and which they will destroy when they are finished with it, that means the democratic process as well as the armalite when they have achieved their goal.

Reporter:

Could I just clarify one point made already? The policy in future is going to be the same if an amicable arrangement can be made with relatives then certain things can be agreed to. But, if there's the least suspicion that there's going to be a paramilitary display, the police will prevent that happening or try to prevent it happening?

Sir John Hermon:

Yes, we will, because that in itself has a most unsettling and disruptive effect on a group or community which is very sensitive and divided. Our function is to police the total community and maintain the peace within it. Unfortunately, we have a job to do and we cannot play politics or propaganda and presentational terms is not something which we can always enjoy in our favour but we will do our duty, as we have proven by the way, beyond any criticism, in 1985 and 1986 and indeed well before that.

Reporter:

Sir John, can the police presence be modified in such a way as to prevent the major disruption which has occurred during the last two days?

Sir John Hermon:

Yes it can. I would like to advise you that on Monday and Tuesday of this week there were a total of 226 incidents, in the previous week there were 30, almost eight times as many. I would ask you to remit the extreme violence and disruption of this community, particularly in the Belfast area to that funeral. And I would ask you to recognise that the violence

from late Sunday to Monday was to divert police resources so that PIRA had their will over the funeral. That in itself is totally corroborative of my previous statement about intelligence. They provoked street violence throughout Belfast city to divert police resources in the hope that we would be so dissipated that they could impose their will on a community and to break the law with impunity.

Reporter:

If you go back to the Friday of the bomb explosion and the events of that day, there was no IRA funeral then and there was major disruption then.

Sir John Hermon:

Yes there was. And they said that they would do it. We do our best to prevent it but you must realise we can't be everywhere at once.