

Special Right to Housing Issue

The interdependence of civil and political and social, economic and cultural rights has generated enormous momentum at the international level as well as in the legal provisions of many states. As the debate about a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland gathers steam, with the Bill of Rights Forum now beginning its work in earnest, the question of interdependence will take on a greater significance at the local level. In previous special editions of Just News, we have examined social and economic rights more generally. Over the rest of the year, we intend to look at these rights individually, starting this month with the right to housing.

Time to Act

NICCY calls on Northern Ireland Housing Executive to end Seven Towers squalor

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Patricia Lewsley, called for the Housing Executive to act in order to end the poor living conditions blighting children's growing up experiences in North Belfast's Seven Towers flats.

Her call came after a recent visit to the area. Following her visit the Commissioner expressed her shock at the state of living conditions and play areas.

"I will be contacting the Housing Executive and the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister to call for these appalling conditions to be improved immediately," said Ms Lewsley. "It is disgusting that in 2007 children are growing up in homes blighted with atrocious damp, where baths on occasion overflow with sewage, and have communal areas that are spoiled by waste and filthy pigeon droppings."

The Commissioner said her anger at the conditions was increased by the fact that the Housing Executive had assured NICCY some time ago these conditions would be improved.

"Two years ago my predecessor Nigel Williams visited the flats and received assurances that the problems would be resolved. Since then, it appears from my recent visit, little has been done. "I now call on the Minister for Social Development, David Hanson, to intervene on behalf of these children and for the Housing Executive to address the issues at Seven Towers within days not months or years."

This is the second time that the Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People has publicly expressed concern at the conditions at the north Belfast flats complex.

The late Nigel Williams, who was the first Children's Commissioner in Northern Ireland, expressed his anger at the situation after visiting the area:

"I have worked in the past as a councillor for inner city London and visited many tower blocks before, but that did not prepare me for what I saw in north Belfast. "I know that many people have been trying to get the situation improved. I am under no illusion that there is a quick fix solution to this problem. However, we must continue to work together now to find a solution and I am going to consider carefully how I, as Commissioner for children and young people, can accelerate the work of all those people involved, including statutory agencies."

Ms Lewsley is currently waiting for a response from the Ministerial team and relevant agencies.

Jonathan Traynor
Press Officer, Northern Ireland Commission for Children and Young People

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The North Belfast Housing Strategy launched by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) in 2000 was supposed to address housing need across all communities in north Belfast. Claiming to acknowledge the differing nature of housing need in differing communities, the strategy was to primarily tackle housing *conditions* in unionist communities and the dire housing *waiting list* in the nationalist/republican communities.

Seven Towers

The Seven Towers are a block of high rise flats in the New Lodge area of north Belfast. With a capacity of more than 350 flats, it is, following the destruction of the Ballymun high rise in Dublin, the biggest development of its kind on the island of Ireland. Having been constructed in the 1960s the Towers are in a serious state of disrepair with consequent maintenance, sewage, dampness, and structural problems prevalent. For residents and families in the Seven Towers whose housing 'needs' are not met by high rise developments, the housing crisis in north Belfast has uniquely detrimental effects.

When the North Belfast Strategy was launched by the NIHE it received severe criticism from the St Patrick's and St Joseph's Housing Committee, the local housing group. Independent research commissioned by the Committee a number of years into the Strategy, entitled '*Waiting for Equality*', severely criticised the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the NIHE for not only refusing to tackle the waiting list, but for also failing "to engage with criticism of the North Belfast Strategy in a consistent or considered manner."

These criticisms seem to have been vindicated. According to the NIHE, from 2000-2006, with one year left in the life of the strategy, applicants on the waiting list qualifying for housing stress have increased from 880 to 1212 (+38%), with 80% of those designated as Catholic. Of course, it is pertinent to note that these figures do not indicate 'individuals' but households, *ie.* the true figure of people on the waiting list actually runs into thousands. Although the strategy was monitored with mid-term report, no significant measures were taken to alter direction.

Lots of excuses

Of course, there are many excuses to avoid tackling the housing crisis in north Belfast: it is a 'political football'; the

'peacelines' mark boundaries protected by paramilitary and political muscle; there's a lack of available land; competition with private developers; and cumbersome procedures makes the vesting of available land by the DSD extremely difficult. There is also a government policy requiring 'shared spaces' in our metropolitan centres. The provisions of social housing in this area of north Belfast would mean the addition of 'Catholic' working class housing and as such it is not acceptable. Read between the lines of the North Belfast Housing Strategy 2000-2007, and the proposals under consultation for the development of Belfast City Centre's North West Quarter (the Grimley Report, see Just News March 2007), and you will find many of these excuses implicit, if not explicit.

It was in this context that the Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) Project began working with residents of the Seven Towers on using a 'rights based approach' to their housing issues.

Rights based approach

By 'rights based approach' the PPR Project understands an approach which, at its core, addresses the power relationship between duty bearers and rights holders. By empowering communities to assert their social and economic rights, the rights based approach promotes participation by affected communities in decisions which affect their lives. This approach has the potential to increase the responsiveness of the state, thereby enhancing democratic accountability on the basis of right.

However, implicit in the 'rights based approach' is an acknowledgment of the systematic and institutional exclusion of disadvantaged communities from participation, and the means to access participation, in resource allocation and service delivery decisions. There is also an acknowledgement that in order to achieve sustainable change, the processes of changing power relationships are as important as 'getting the result'. There is no short cut to redressing power imbalances, and power is not a gift bestowed by the powerful to the powerless – it inevitably involves struggle.

The initial phase of the project involved providing an open and safe space for residents to raise and discuss their housing conditions. Following outreach work with residents, a 'Diary Room' video involving face to face interviews about conditions in the Seven Towers was produced. Residents raised issues about sewage, maintenance, dampness, social isolation, effects on mental health, the detrimental impact the living conditions had on their children, and the indignity of being treated as a problem as opposed to a human being with rights. This video was then screened at open residents' meetings to generate discussion and talk

Participation of local people in addressing housing rights in Seven Towers

about how the project was able to assist and support residents attempting to bring about change.

The St Patrick's and St Joseph's Housing Committee has challenged the NIHE on many of these issues previously, indeed the Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the previous Children's Commissioner, the late Nigel Williams, raised serious concerns following visits to the Towers a number of years ago. However, the lack of an adequate response from the NIHE following these representations led to the group of residents (mostly parents) who began working on the project, to invite Ms Patricia Lewsley, the recently appointed Children's Commissioner, to meet with them and see conditions for herself in March 2007. This was followed by strong representations by the Commissioner to the NIHE, DSD and OFM/DFM about the continued poor conditions. (see front page).

To underpin this lobbying and campaigning work, in January 2007 residents began 'rights based approach' training which included modules in: pre-development and confidence building; introduction to human rights; action research; and devising practical strategies.

Monitoring Progressive Realisation

On the basis of its legal obligations which arise from signing and ratifying international human rights treaties, the government and its statutory agencies have a responsibility to 'progressively realise' the right to adequate housing for communities. Governments could be breaching residents' right to adequate housing if conditions deteriorate or do not improve over a period of time. Part of the residents' strategy is to devise locally monitored human rights indicators which could measure change, or otherwise, over a defined period. This approach provides the opportunity for residents to articulate in an extremely tangible, and measurable, fashion what the 'right to adequate housing' means to them and how

the relevant statutory agencies could positively act to fulfil these rights – as they are obliged to do.

To this end, the group of residents have utilised photography and door-to-door surveys to establish a baseline of present conditions and current resident participation in the decision making process, and will engage in further action research to establish what 'progressive realisation' would concretely mean for local residents. Indeed a public hearing involving international experts on the right to housing is scheduled for June 2007 where the residents will present the findings of their research and their housing rights indicators.

Networking

The building of alliances and networks of support for the residents once they finish the training and develop a strategy is of fundamental importance to ensure sustainability and spread best practice. Creating networks which link NGOs, community groups, academics, lawyers, and international experts on human rights together - in the context of localised, selected, and concrete issues - has the power to generate real change. In the longer term it also creates different ways of working for not only the residents, but for all participants in the alliance by engaging in a process which is mutually beneficial and strengthens the hands of all the stakeholders.

Objective conditions are not favourable towards maximizing the success of this approach. The current review of Section 75 has the potential to undermine the equality provisions of the Belfast Agreement, including the rights of disadvantaged groups to participate in the decision making process which should be central to its operation. The work already carried out by the residents of the Seven Towers is testament to the fact that when participation is real and genuine, communities (as rights holders) will not be found wanting in shaping and determining policy on the basis of 'right'. How about the state (as duty bearer) – is it willing to genuinely engage with communities on the basis of 'right'? Inevitably, as was said before, there is a struggle ahead.

Dessie Donnelly
Development Worker
Participation and the Practice of Rights Project

Housing Rig

In the late summer of 2006, the Municipality of Patras in Greece demolished the homes of 70 Roma families. In scenes reminiscent of Zimbabwe, bulldozers flattened the structures of the families leaving them homeless and destitute. This is despite a Greek court order halting the proposed evictions and a 2004 ruling from the European Committee on Social Rights which found significant violations of the right to housing of Roma. Yet, local authorities continue to evict with impunity, prosecutors have even threatened to criminally investigate magistrates who halt evictions of Roma, while the national government has displayed little political will to tackle the issues.

But housing rights challenges are not confined to a single European country. In the Republic of Ireland, the same pattern emerges. A ten-year old Traveller accommodation programme has been mostly stillborn and the government has refused to create enforcement measures to make sure local authorities provide Traveller-specific accommodation. At the same time, it introduced harsh new criminal laws that permit evictions of Travellers, many of whom are living by the roadside waiting for accommodation. In France, a significant number of buildings housing migrants have been destroyed by fire, despite promises made at the highest levels of government to tackle the issue.

Many European countries lack sufficient refuges for victims of domestic violence and in the case of *A. T. v Hungary*, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women found Hungary had violated the Covenant by failing to provide sufficient and appropriate shelters for women in these circumstances. In South-Eastern Europe, 30,000 Serb Croat families are still denied return to their homes in Croatia and the European Court of Human Rights, when confronted with what could only be described as *ex post* ethnic cleansing, twice reverted to dubious technical reasons in order to dismiss complaints brought by Serb Croats. In many Western and Eastern countries, a significant part of public housing stock has been sold off and subsidised mortgage schemes cannot realistically reach all of those in need.

The forces driving these denials of housing rights are familiar. They include *lack of political will* (partly a result of the fact that housing services and programmes lack the universal character of social goods such as education and health); *discrimination and prejudice* (which results in marginalised groups being exposed to insecure tenure and forced evictions, the denial of access to residence permits and housing and land programmes and lack of prioritisation

in resource allocation); *market fundamentalism* which means leaving the implementation of housing rights in the hands of the private sector, whether it be relaxing rental regulations, privatising service delivery, prioritising home ownership or letting gentrification run its course, and an overall reluctance to devote *national*/budgetary resources to the issue.

This is not to say that Europe (both West and East) has not made significant achievements in realising housing rights for the poorest and the marginalised. Housing programmes, related social security entitlements and, to some extent, tenancy laws are more advanced than in other parts of the world. But, Europe possesses immeasurably more resources than other regions.

So how does this record stack up against the international human rights obligations of European states? Almost all of them have ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which requires States Parties to recognise and progressively realise the right to housing. In General Comment No.4, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which monitors this Covenant, has stated that the right to housing has seven key elements which must be realised without discrimination. These are: (a) legal security of tenure; (b) availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure; (c) affordability; (d) habitability; (e) accessibility; (f) adequate location; and (g) cultural adequacy. With respect to each of these requirements the state has an immediate duty to respect and protect these rights from interference by government or private actors. On this matter the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights issued General Comment No. 7 on forced evictions. Here the Committee has prescribing that they only occur in exceptional circumstances, with consultation on alternatives and due process, together with adequate alternative accommodation, a position largely endorsed by the Human Rights Committee when examining the civil right to protection of the home under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. States are also required to fulfil the right, to progressively realise the right to housing within their maximum available resources.

At the same time, European state (with a few notable exceptions) have agreed to the even higher standards imposed by the European Social Charter. This treaty provides no exceptions for resource limitations, though the monitoring body, European Committee on Social Rights, will take the issue into account in exceptional circumstances. The original 1996 charter requires States to provide family housing (article 16) and the revised Charter (ratified by 23 States) includes a specific right to housing. In a series of collective complaints on violations of Roma housing rights brought against Greece, Italy and Bulgaria, the Committee has taken a similar approach to its UN counterpart. Despite some questionable decisions, the

ights in Europe

European Court of Human Rights has increasingly taken a tough stand on forced evictions. In *Connors v United Kingdom* the Court stated: “the eviction of the applicant and his family from the local authority site was not attended by the requisite procedural safeguards, namely the requirement to establish proper justification for the serious interference with his rights and consequently cannot be regarded as justified by a ‘pressing social need’ or proportionate to the legitimate aim being pursued. There has, accordingly, been a violation of Article 8 of the Convention.”

Therefore, while Europe can be compared favourably to the rest of world, the growing focus on housing rights violations indicates many of its residents could not relate to the phrase ‘safe as houses’, which perhaps epitomises the current experience of the wealthier end of Europe, who are enjoying a sustained property market boom.

Taking a human rights approach to housing law, policy and programmes requires attention to a number of issues. The first is the use of normative standards – whether embodied in law, concrete entitlements or general standards. This is an aspect of the housing equation that often goes unnoticed in traditional approaches, except in the case of tenants. While European human rights institutions are scrutinising evictions more closely this is not always reflected at the national level; property rights and selective eviction usually prevail, often due to a panoply of other laws that affect the most vulnerable groups, for example, laws aimed at minorities, trespass laws, health and safety laws, building regulations and road laws. There is rarely any overarching law that ensures they must be subservient to human rights standards. Beyond evictions, there is a general need to ensure that programmes eschew simple charitable or punitive approaches and embody some form of basic and inalienable entitlement. Traveller groups in Ireland consistently point out that the Traveller accommodation lacks a clear binding obligation on local authorities to provide accommodation and an effective mechanism to enforce that obligation. Care also needs to be taken with more punitive approaches to social security payments (including housing payments) which have not only significantly dropped in many countries but the entitlement to them is increasingly contingent (or indirectly discriminatory) on a wider range of factors, sometimes leading to abrupt halt in payments which amplifies the possibility of eviction and the beginning of new poverty cycles.

The second contribution of a housing rights based approach is to focus on *discrimination and marginalised and disadvantaged groups*. Even when resources are plentiful, discrimination in access to housing can flourish without intervention. The case of *ERRC v Greece* before the European Committee on Social Rights is perhaps a good example; it uncovered an evictions law that was exclusively focused on Roma. The law was partially amended by the

Greek government during the proceedings before the Committee. A focus on women and marginalised and disadvantaged groups therefore means looking at the particular factors that impede those groups accessing housing. In many cases these obstacles can be hidden and indirectly discriminatory. In Bulgaria, laws that permit regularisation of land are almost never applied in the case of Roma. Yet, they are disproportionately represented amongst informal occupiers even though many families trace back their settlement for a century. Likewise, integration of migrants in the housing field requires particular attention. In France, programmes focused on providing support for migrant housing have been halted over the last few decades, with 50,000 refugees, migrant workers, asylum seekers and illegal migrants being dangerously housed in Paris alone.

The concept of *participation* is well known - it not only ensures good design and implementation of policies, but is a right in itself. While participation is mainstreamed to a certain extent – with national and local consultative committees increasingly common – the challenge is to take participation beyond mere or token consultation into real influence. This requires the empowerment of the beneficiaries to actively participate and ensuring that that disadvantaged groups in ‘participatory’ forums and processes are not outnumbered or deprived of having any real influence.

Lastly, the *raison d’être* of the rights based approach is *accountability*, and a system of accountability that should extend beyond a ‘complaints box’ in an unlit corridor of a government department. The methods are numerous: whether it be networking and mobilisation, protests, media advocacy, information sharing, lodging legal and administrative complaints, or developing official monitoring mechanisms such as ombudspersons, review panels and internal government accountability. Some of these dimensions have more of an explicit rights character – for example legal complaints or classic media advocacy – but they are all part of the process for ensuring that commitments are transformed into results.

In developing better systems of accountability, we need to be creative. If we have inspectors for child labour, why can’t we have inspectors ensuring compliance with tenancy laws?

Malcolm Langford
*Visiting Fellow, Norwegian Centre on Human Rights**

This article partly draws on a speech given at the Housing Rights in Europe Conference, 18-19 September 2006, hosted by Ministry of the Environment of Finland, FEANTSA and Y Foundation

A Right to Housing in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland

A large number of states have legally enshrined a right to housing (or 'adequate housing'). In several countries, such as France and Scotland, the right to housing has been included in the legal framework by statute. Elsewhere, it has been accorded constitutional status. While in some instances, the constitutional right to housing is fully justiciable, (e.g., South Africa, Brazil and Timor-Leste), in a number of jurisdictions, the right takes the form of a non-binding, directive principles or policy objective (e.g., Spain, Belgium and Nigeria). In other countries, the right to housing has become part of constitutional law as a result of the incorporation of international human rights instruments, containing that right, into the constitutional framework (e.g., Argentina). Finally, the right to housing has been implied from other rights expressly enshrined in the constitution, including the right to life (e.g., India and Bangladesh).

Several challenges may be identified in relation to enshrining the right to housing in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland (BORN). These include the actual definition of the right to housing and the identification of the obligations imposed on the state by that right. However, these alleged obstacles may be addressed by referring to influential human rights standards and by considering experiences from other jurisdictions in which the right to housing has been legally guaranteed. Drafters will be greatly aided by the fact that the right is one of the most well-defined rights under international human rights law.

Possibly the most celebrated enunciations of the right to housing are Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 11(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), both of which recognise the right to housing as a key element of the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living. Bearing in mind that the UK has ratified the ICESCR, it is appropriate to look for guidance to that Covenant, and the statements of the Committee responsible for monitoring it (CESCR), for guidance in formulating a right to housing under BORN. In dealing with Article 11(1), the CESCR has in General Comment no. 4 identified several key elements of the right to housing (see centre pages).. Thus, in order to comply with the UK's international human rights obligations, any right to housing under BORN must either expressly or implicitly contain these elements.

All human rights, including the right to housing, impose a combination of positive and negative duties on the state and this should be acknowledged explicitly in the BORN, either in specific rights provisions or in a general introductory provision. Thus, any right to housing under the Bill of Rights should be recognised as imposing obligations on the state to respect, protect and fulfil that right.

In some instruments, the right to housing has been phrased in such a way as to suggest that the right imposes an absolute, immediate obligation on states parties to provide housing on demand. See, e.g., s.58 of the Timor-Leste Constitution: 'everyone has the right to a house, both for himself or herself and for his or her family, of adequate size that meets satisfactory standards of hygiene and comfort and preserves personal intimacy and family privacy'. However, under international human rights instruments, states parties are generally obliged to realise the right to housing 'progressively', rather than immediately (e.g., Article 2(1) ICESCR). In addition, the right to housing has frequently been expressed as subject to 'available resources' or State's 'means' (e.g., Article 27(3) of the Convention of the Rights of the Child). Indeed, even where a socio-economic right is not expressed in that format, such qualifications have been read in. (See, e.g., the European Committee of Social Rights decision in *Autisme-Europe v France*, Complaint No. 13/2002, 7 Nov. 2003). Thus, a right to housing under BORN may well be phrased in terms of progressive realisation - subject, of course, to the immediate obligations imposed by the right to housing, such as non-discrimination and the obligation to satisfy the 'minimum core' obligation imposed by that right).

Crucially, a right to housing under the BORN must be justiciable. Although the precise method by which Covenant rights are given effect in national law is a matter for each State party to decide, the CESCR has stated that the means used should be appropriate in the sense of producing results which are consistent with the full discharge of its obligations by the State party. (General Comment 9 on the Domestic Implementation of the Covenant, para 5). In the UK, a 'full discharge' of the State's obligations will require the provision of judicial remedies for violations of the right to housing, as otherwise such a right may remain merely aspirational and, ultimately, may not be fully implemented.

The content and phrasing of a right to housing in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland will be influenced by the housing conditions and issues prevalent in Northern Ireland. However, any such provision must take into account the UK's international human rights law obligations.

Aoife Nolan
Assistant Director, Human Rights Centre
Queen's University Belfast

Housing rights - the Northern Ireland context

If you search the Internet for 'The Right to Housing' you will be faced with a bewildering choice of websites and articles. In fact, most of the websites refer to rights in respect of housing rather than the right to housing per se. However, closer scrutiny will reveal that, while there is an acknowledgement that 'the right to housing should be placed at the centre of the political agenda'¹, it is presented in legislation as only one item in a menu of rights and most of these rights are aspirational rather than enforceable in law.

There is a lot of confusion about the exact meaning of the right to housing, for while it has been included in a number of international human rights instruments, the right to housing means in practice within Europe, remains contested. This means that within the Europe, member states commit themselves to the progressive realisation of the right to housing and that by and large the formal right to housing is unenforceable through the European Court of Human Rights.

Internationally, the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights states that 'despite the fact that the international community has frequently re-affirmed the importance of full respect for the right to adequate housing, there remains a disturbingly large gap between the standards set in the Covenant of Human Rights and the situation prevailing in many parts of the world.'²

This gap is not just acute in the developing world but there are significant problems of homelessness in some of the most economically developed countries, including the United Kingdom. Those presenting to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive as homeless have increased by 60% since 2000.³

That such a situation has been able to develop during the incumbency of a Labour government arises from the United Kingdom's abdication of its responsibility to enforce the rights of all its citizens in exchange for a 'purely symbolic approach'. The letter has focused on Strategies, Action Plans and an array of discretionary services which play lip service to inclusion while actively excluding some of the most vulnerable. This constitutes an odd form of "progressive realisation" indeed! Of course other factors also come into play, including the residualisation of social housing, a lack of affordable housing, few safeguards on adequate standards for private landlords and the relegation of housing in importance by the Treasury.

However, fundamentally, in most of the UK, legally enforced

access to housing is not so much dependant on human rights but being the right kind of person. In Northern Ireland, under the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, only certain individuals have a right to housing that can be enforced through the courts.

Those people have to:

- be genuinely homeless (i.e. have **nowhere** else to live),
- not done or omitted to do anything that resulted in their homelessness (e.g. failed to pay their rent)
- be vulnerable and in a priority group (this 'vulnerability' is closely defined) and
- be an 'eligible' person (this means that, in the opinion of the NIHE, you are the type of tenant they would like to live in their property – no ASBO need apply).

In stark contrast to the situation which prevails in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which separates the deserving from the undeserving, Scotland has become an example of best practice, emulated by other states, including France, for its legally enforceable right to housing.

Scotland are introducing, incrementally, a right for all homeless people to be housed, including those who have no specific health or welfare problems or who are single, even those who have proved to be difficult tenants in the past. There is a duty upon local authorities to house homeless presenters, develop robust strategies and for other statutory bodies outside housing, for example health, to take homelessness into account in the provision of their services.

If we believe that access to stable housing is a precondition for the exercise of most other fundamental rights and that homelessness is a negation of citizenship, depriving individuals of educational and employment opportunities, good mental and physical health and security, then any Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland must include the right to housing for all our citizens as a priority. Perhaps we too can learn from our closest neighbour.

Ricky Rowledge
Director, Council for the Homeless NI

(Endnotes)

¹ Audition of the Convention on the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Brussels, European Parliament 2000 FEANTSA

² The right to adequate housing (Art. 11 (1)) CESCR General Comment 4 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 1991

³ NIHE Statistics 2000/01
–2005/6

Civil Liberties Diary

March 6 Figures requested by the Belfast News Letter under the Freedom of Information Act reveal that 71% of current PSNI officers have served in the RUC.

March 7 NI Secretary of State Peter Hain lodges 19 grounds in his appeal against a High Court ruling that he broke the law over the appointment of Victims Commissioner Bertha McDougall and that his officials tried to cover it up.

March 8 Equality Commission warns that pregnant women are still losing their jobs as part of gender discrimination. Statistics show that between April 2005 and February 2007 the Commission received 1,782 inquiries or complaints on gender related complaints.

March 10 Police Ombudsman begins inquiry into claims that police shielded informers within the IRA from murder charges. Human car bomb victim Patsy Gillespie is believed to be one of six murders that will be investigated.

High Court hears that prison officers forced to give evidence in public at the Billy Wright murder inquiry have a real and genuine fear for their safety. The action is part of a judicial review of the Inquiry's refusal to grant two prison officers and three civil servants anonymity.

March 12 Raymond McCord flies to America to meet US presidential contenders Hilary Clinton, Barack Obama and John McCain to ask for their backing in his bid to bring prosecutions against police officers who shielded his son's killers.

The Irish Government has proposed the introduction of electronic fingerprinting for immigrants and asylum seekers. The move is part of an overhaul of the system used by the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service.

Almost 20 Children and teenagers have been sent to psychiatric

hospitals outside Northern Ireland over the past two years due to a chronic shortage of specialist mental health services. Suicidal young people and those with eating disorders were among patients treated at dedicated adolescent mental health units in England, Scotland and the Republic.

Laura Lee Jenkins, a 21 year paraplegic student, wins legal battle to force her personal care company to lift her into a wheelchair she needs for university. The action was backed by the Equality Commission.

March 16 Leading Australian human rights lawyer and activist Chris Sidoti has been appointed as the independent Chair of the new Northern Ireland Bill of Rights Forum. The body was established last December to produce agreed recommendations on Bill of Rights to inform the NIHRC.

Police Ombudsman's Office is to investigate a shooting in north Belfast where police opened fire on a suspect.

March 21 Amnesty International urges City of Derry airport to become the first airport in Europe to adopt its new protocol in dealing with CIA rendition flights.

Retired police officers group releases a detailed rebuttal of the Police Ombudsman's report on loyalist collusion, claiming its findings are "crucially flawed" and the group demands a public apology.

March 22 Police officers patrolling west Belfast hand out their mobile phone numbers to residents in a move to build trust. More than 7,000 leaflets are posted thru letter boxes of homes in Poleglass, Twinbrook and Lagmore as "personalised policing" is introduced.

A report by Chief Inspector of Prisons, Anne Owers, reveals that the Home Office round-up of released foreign prisoners for deportation in the wake of last year's crisis was so indiscriminate that it included some British citizens. It also wrongly

involved the detention of Irish ex-offenders, even though they had lived in Britain for decades with their families, and some who had committed minor offences. She criticised the actions as lacking humanity.

March 23 The Annual conference of the Ulster Teachers Union hears how a young girl was denied a place in school because she had no English. The problem stemmed from a lack of English as Additional Language (EAL) support at the school. Patrick Yu, of the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities, said the failure to deliver language support could amount to a breach of international human rights legislation.

March 29 The Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern announces to the Dail that nobody is likely to be charged following the report into the 1974 Dublin and Monaghan bombings.

The House of Lords has ordered that all police intelligence files on the controversial security force killing of two IRA men be disclosed to allow full inquests into their deaths. Martin McCaughey and Dessie Grew were shot by SAS soldiers at Loughall in 1990. In 1993 the DPP ruled that none of the soldiers involved would face criminal charges and in 2005 the Court of Appeal had ruled in favour of the Chief Constable withholding certain information.

Compiled by Mark Bassett from various newspapers.



Just News welcomes readers' news, views and comments.

Just News is published by the Committee on the Administration of Justice Ltd.

Correspondence should be addressed to the Editor, **Fionnuala Ni Aoláin**, CAJ Ltd.

45/47 Donegall Street, Belfast BT1 2BR

Phone (028) 9096 1122

Fax: (028) 9024 6706

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