JUSTICE AT LAST – AFTER 50 YEARS!

By Kevin Callahan

On May 12th, a long-awaited coroner's report on British army killings in 1971 in a Belfast neighbourhood exonerated the ten victims and presented a chilling account of the actions of the Parachute regiment.

Most people with any knowledge of Ireland know about Bloody Sunday in Derry in 1972 when British paratroopers fired on a peaceful civil rights march and killed 13 people. This became one of the most iconic moments of the 30-year conflict in Northern Ireland. Not so many are aware of the horrific events that ensued over a 36-hour period in the nationalist area of Ballymurphy in August 1971. The British army had just implemented internment without trial and swooped into nationalist areas and arrested hundreds of men without charge. In a 36-hour period in Ballymurphy, 10 people, one woman and nine men, were shot dead by British soldiers. One of those killed was a Catholic priest, Fr. Hugh Mullan, who was giving last rites to another victim. The official British army position, parroted by the media at the time, was that those killed were either armed IRA volunteers or caught in crossfires. For five decades, the families of the dead campaigned for an impartial enquiry into the killings. Finally, in 2018 their prayers were answered, and an inquest began.

The conclusions of the report are unequivocal. The coroner, Mrs. Justice Keegan stated that "All of the deceased in the series of inquests were entirely innocent of wrongdoing on the day in question." She also rejected claims by soldiers that some of the victims had been armed and shooting.

Joan Connolly, one of eight children of Joan Connolly who the soldiers had branded an IRA gunwoman after they had shot her dead, said she felt "The joy and the peace and mixed emotions that my mummy has been declared an innocent woman."

After the report was released, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson apologized for the actions of the soldiers in a phone call to Northern Ireland's first minister, Arlene Foster, and the deputy first minister, Michelle O'Neill. This third-party approach to acknowledging the massacre provoked considerable backlash, and Johnson now says he will write letters of apology to the families of the victims. However, they are calling on him to apologize in the House of Commons as former prime minister David Cameron did in 2010 over the Bloody Sunday victims.

While the revelations of the report are welcome for bringing some closure to the families of the victims, it is a sad commentary that it took 50 years of hard campaigning for the truth to come out.