

STATE PAPERS: NORTHERN IRELAND

Brutality against suspects detailed

POLICE doctors, MPs, priests and the Northern Ireland Police Authority were growing increasingly concerned at mounting evidence of brutality in RUC interrogation centres in the north in the late seventies.

The allegations were to lead directly to the establishment of the Bennett Inquiry, headed by an English judge, which reported in March 1979.

Bennett confirmed that injuries sustained in police custody were not self-inflicted. The government accepted its major recommendations, including the installation of closed-circuit television in interview rooms.

On October 11 1977 senior NIO official AA Pritchard reported on a meeting between RUC Chief Constable Sir Kenneth Newman and the Police Doctors' Association, at which the doctors expressed their "misgivings" and the chief constable replied.

It was agreed there would be a further meeting at which the doctors would produce particulars of "a number of cases of alleged brutality which they wished to bring to the attention of the chief constable".

The official understood that Sir Ken was prepared to establish a joint working group under Assistant Chief Constable Jack Hermon (later RUC chief constable) to examine the cases.

The mounting concern over the issue of mistreatment of prisoners concerned the NIO. A memo dated October 21 1977 noted that the issue had united the SDLP, the Civil Rights Association, Provisional Sinn Féin and loyalist organisations.

In particular, SDLP leader Gerry Fitt MP had announced his intention to press for an inquiry while Andy Tyrrie, supreme commander of the UDA, had declared his support to expose the activities of certain officers at Castlereagh holding centre.

An intelligence briefing document in the file warned of the possible international impact of allegations of police brutality. Their effect would be "to undermine a recent trend towards a more understanding attitude in America towards HMG's position" while there were also signs of renewed Soviet interest in the matter.

By October 1977 the issue was given renewed urgency by a planned *This Week* programme by journalist Peter Taylor regarding allegations of RUC ill-treatment of suspects during interrogation.

On October 27 1977 AA Pritchard circulated a memo to ministers and officials on the brutality allegations.

He referred to a talk which he had had with the chief constable regarding the "misgivings" of the police doctors "about particular cases of police brutality".

Sir Ken said he had been able to reassure the doctors about their concerns "but there was little likelihood that they would be prepared to speak up for the RUC on the general question of alleged brutality if the particular cases became the subject of public debate".

The chief constable told the official that he felt "he had contributed to the build-up of the current campaign through his decision to permit private doctors to visit those under interrogation at Castlereagh".

"Dubious elements had taken advantage of this ruling," he said.

Following the screening of the *This Week* programme on October 27 1977 the allegations intensified.

On November 12 Fr Raymond Murray, chaplain to Armagh (women's) Prison wrote to Secretary of State Roy Mason about the case of prisoner Mary McCann who had alleged ill-treatment under interrogation at Castlereagh holding centre.

"She alleges she was interviewed 13 times and during that time was pushed, pulled, slapped, kicked, threatened by interrogators, both male and female," Fr Murray wrote.

"She had extensive bruising on both knees and on the front of her legs; there is a lump and bruise over her left eye and bruises on her left arm. I have seen the injuries myself.

"Her allegations are disturbing and raise a serious moral issue. Only an independent, impartial investigation would dispense one's fears."

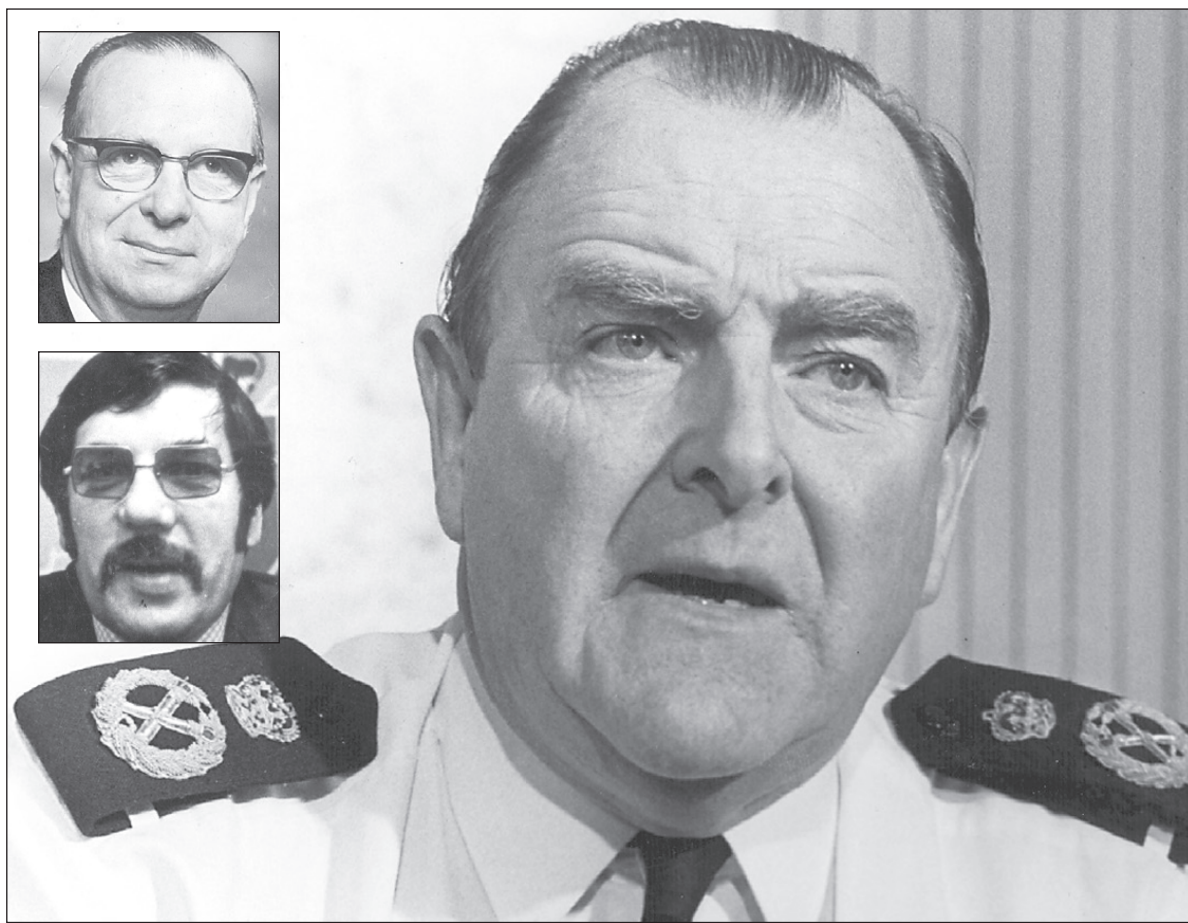
The pressures increased with a letter from Gerry Fitt on October 28 1977 concerning the case of Tony Crozier, of Co Armagh, alleging serious allegations of police brutality at Armagh RUC Station, including being beaten with an iron pipe.

Crozier claimed an RUC man put a gun to his head and threatened him with assassination on a border road.

Mr Fitt was informed by NIO junior minister James Dunn that the complaint would be forwarded to the chief constable for investigation.

Meanwhile, on November 10 1977, leading Belfast defence solicitor PJ McGrory wrote a strong letter to Roy Mason on behalf of a large number of solicitors who shared "the conviction that ill-treatment of suspects by police officers with the object of obtaining confessions is now common practice" and that this occurred most often at Castlereagh.

"We find it very difficult to accept



■ **INTERROGATION DEBATE:** Main picture, the then Assistant Chief Constable Jack Hermon. Inset, SDLP leader Gerry Fitt, top, and UDA supreme commander Andy Tyrrie
PICTURES: Irish News archive

that this happens without the knowledge of a substantial number of police officers of senior rank," he wrote.

Mr McGrory said the solicitors would be presenting evidence to the forthcoming Amnesty International inquiry into the allegations.

Mr Mason assured the lawyer that neither he nor the chief constable would condone "lapses in the behaviour of police officers and the NIO and RUC would cooperate with the Amnesty inquiry."

The crisis deepened on December 9 1977 with a strong letter to Mr Mason from Joe Cooper, a leading trade unionist and chairman of the Armagh Prison Board of Visitors.

Mr Cooper told Mr Mason that the board had interviewed six female prisoners at Armagh Jail who had returned from Armagh Courthouse, having been escorted by the RUC.

"The prisoners were in a very distressed and shocked condition. A couple had torn clothing and others had bruises and marks of having been recently physically assaulted by the RUC escort party," he said.

"The [board] were very concerned at the condition of the prisoners... It was unanimously decided to minute this concern and to request that the allegations be investigated to prevent a reoccurrence."

By March 1978, six months after the initial allegations, the situation was beginning to concern the members of the Police Authority.

On March 9 two members, Dr W Baird and Mr Canavan, met NIO junior minister James Dunn about the "very serious" concerns of police surgeons about possible ill-treatment of prisoners under interrogation.

The surgeons had requested a meeting with the chief constable and the authority "so that they could be reassured that maltreatment would cease and that adequate safeguards would be put in place".

Certain surgeons, they told the minister, "had intimated that they would have to consider approaching Amnesty International to express their views, particularly as they had already given statements [to Amnesty] which held at that time but

now in their view did not".

Mr Canavan said the chief constable had refused to meet the Police Authority on the matter.

Mr Dunn said it "would be most unfortunate if the surgeons approached Amnesty International as it would destroy all the good work which the Police Authority had done". He would speak to the secretary of state about the whole issue.

The file shows that on March 7 1978 WH Baird of the Police Authority wrote to Chief Constable Sir Ken Newman on the brutality issue.

He said the Police Authority had met three police doctors - Drs Alexander, Elliott and Irwin - who were worried about a "resurgence" of brutality.

They alleged "a general worsening of attitudes following the Amnesty visit". They were uneasy that no result had emerged about specific cases which they had reported to the chief constable last year.

"They have further specific cases which they allege cause grave concern. If no satisfaction is given, they proposed to convey their misgivings to Amnesty International," Mr Baird told the chief constable.

However, the doctors remained concerned. In a note on the file, another official, Dr Maurice Hayes (the future Northern Ireland ombudsman and Dublin senator) reported a meeting with one of the surgeons, Dr Robert Irwin, on April 4 1978.

Dr Irwin struck the official as "a completely credible witness" concerned about his own professional standards and aware of the difficulties of the police; he is not a troublemaker or an agitator but is concerned with the public good and with the human rights of persons in custody".

Dr Hayes reported to ministers: "Dr Irwin said he was alarmed at the number of prisoners showing signs of injury which could not be self-inflicted. These were continuing and were associated with a group of eight or 10 policemen who were consistently described to the doctors by injured prisoners and were familiarly known as the 'Goon Squad'.

"He was convinced that these officers were maltreating prisoners under interrogation as a matter of policy approved by the chief constable."

Dr Irwin said there was a marked increase in the incidence of injuries when Deputy Chief Constable Jack Hermon was on leave.

Dr Hayes said: "The surgeons also feel that they were used to secure a favourable report from Amnesty International and are determined not to be so used again. If asked by Amnesty, they were not prepared to stand over the present practice".

On April 17 1978 one of the surgeons requested a transfer from Gough Barracks, Armagh, triggering a flurry at Stormont Castle.

In his letter of resignation Dr Elliott cited "the intolerable situation regarding the maltreatment-treatment of prisoners".

At a meeting in Belfast on April 18 1978, attended by Mr Dunn and officials, the minister said he wished to get to the root of the problem. He emphasised that "he would not condone cruelty or the man-handling of persons being questioned in Armagh or other centres and, if it was happening, it would have to be stopped".

However, Dr Elliott's departure would trigger a public debate that would "only assist men of violence".

By April 1978 the Standing Advisory Committee on Human Rights had taken up the issue. Under pressure, the chief constable agreed to meet the doctors and consider closed-circuit television at interrogation centres. The doctors welcomed his initiative and Dr Elliott agreed to withdraw his call for a transfer.

The situation improved rapidly. In a letter to Roy Mason on May 11 1978, Police Authority chairman Myles Humphreys reported that the police surgeons were satisfied that "the recrudescence of cases" which had caused them such disquiet in March had ceased.

The following March the Bennett Report confirmed medical evidence of ill-treatment at holding centres and the British government accepted its main recommendations.