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## Paramilitary Groups (Northern Ireland)

1.26 pm

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the assessment of the structure, roles and purpose of paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland, which I am publishing today and copies of which I am placing in the Library. Before I turn to the assessment, it is worth reminding the House of the phenomenal progress that has been made in Northern Ireland over the past 20 years. We have moved on from a time when terrorism was an almost daily fact of life to one where the overwhelming majority have completely rejected violence as a means of trying to secure political ends. The political settlement, which sees people who were once enemies working together for the good of the whole community, has transformed life for the better. However, as the murders of Gerard Davison and Kevin McGuigan have highlighted, there are still serious legacy issues that need to be addressed, and they include the structure, role and purpose of paramilitary groups.

I commissioned an assessment of those matters following the statement in August by the Police Service of Northern Ireland that a line of inquiry in relation to the murder of Kevin McGuigan was the involvement of members of the Provisional IRA. The assessment has been jointly drafted by the PSNI and MI5, drawing on current intelligence, and has been reviewed by three independent figures, Lord Carlile, QC, Rosalie Flanagan and Stephen Shaw, QC. The three reviewers have confirmed today that the PSNI and MI5 engaged fully with them, consistent with their duties and constraints, and that the assessments are, in their words, “fair and balanced”, “evidence based” and “credible”. They state that they are

“satisfied that the assessments meet all the requirements placed upon us”.

I wish to thank the PSNI, MI5, and the independent reviewers for carrying out this important work within the timeframe I gave them.

I would first like to set out the Government’s position on paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland: paramilitary organisations have no place in a democratic society. They were never justified in the past, they are not justified today and they should disband. These organisations brought misery and suffering throughout the 30 years of the troubles. Together, they were responsible for more than 3,000 murders, and thousands more have been injured. Only last week a service was held to mark the 25th anniversary of the IRA murder of that great champion of freedom and democracy, Ian Gow. Today the thoughts of the House should be with all those who suffered directly at the hands of paramilitary organisations. We should also be mindful of the fact that, thanks in large part to the efforts of the police and our armed forces, along with the determination of the overwhelming majority of people across these islands, the future of Northern Ireland will only ever be determined by democracy and consent.

The assessment sets out the position in respect of those organisations that declared ceasefires in order to support and facilitate the political process. It does not cover in any detail the threat posed by dissident republican groupings, which is the subject of separate, regular

1 | Source: Source: Hansard, House of Commons, 20 October 2015

[www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm151020/debtext/151020-0001.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm151020/debtext/151020-0001.htm)

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reports that I make to this House. The assessment does, though, confirm that dissident republicans remain a severe threat and that, at any given time, a terrorist attack from them is highly likely. For our part, the Government will always give the police and security services the fullest possible backing in their efforts to keep the people in Northern Ireland safe and secure.

The assessment confirms that all the main paramilitary groups operating during the troubles are still in existence, including the Ulster Volunteer Force, the Red Hand Commando, the Ulster Defence Association, the Provisional IRA and the Irish National Liberation Army.

On structures, the assessment finds that

“the majority of paramilitary organisations in this report still have leadership structures”—

and—

“organise themselves along militaristic lines.”

It goes on to say:

“These labels make the groups look more prepared for a campaign of violence than they are”—

and that—

“in the highly unlikely event that the groups are minded to return to terrorism, we judge they would be unable to resurrect the capability demonstrated at their peak.”

On the role of these groups, the assessment concludes that

“none of these groups is planning or conducting terrorist attacks”,

although some INLA members have provided help to dissident republican terrorists.

The report also states that

“members of these paramilitary groups continue to engage in violent activity, both directed by local leadership and conducted without sanction.”

It says that

“members of all groups have carried out murders since the 1998 Belfast Agreement.”

In addition, the assessment makes it clear that

“members of these paramilitary groups, to different degrees, are also involved in other serious criminal activity.”

2 | Source: Source: Hansard, House of Commons, 20 October 2015

[www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm151020/debtext/151020-0001.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm151020/debtext/151020-0001.htm)

That includes:

“large scale smuggling operations, fuel laundering, drug dealing and extortion.”

On weapons, the report says that

“although the majority of paramilitary weapons were decommissioned, some were not.”

On the purpose of these groups, it concludes that

“it is our firm assessment that the leaderships of the main paramilitary groups are committed to peaceful means to achieve their political objectives”—

but that—

“we judge that individual members of paramilitary groups with a legacy of violent activity still represent a threat to national security.”

The report is in no doubt that these groups

“cause serious harm to the communities in which they are embedded and undermine support for policing.”

On the individual groups, the assessment confirms that the

“structures of the UVF remain in existence and that there are some indications of recruitment.”

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It states that

“the UVF’s leadership has attempted to steer its membership towards peaceful initiatives and to carve out a new constructive role in representing the loyalist community.”

However, the assessment goes on to confirm that

“a larger number of members, including some senior figures, are extensively involved in organised crime.”

UVF members are also involved in paramilitary assaults.

In respect of the UDA, the assessment concludes that while its structures remain in existence they have “become increasingly fragmented” and are split into “discrete geographical areas” that “act almost completely autonomously.”

The assessment states that

“with the support of some leadership figures there are UDA members who have continued attempts to steer the group into positive community based activism.”

Others, however, remain engaged in criminality and violence with individual members and some senior figures involved in organised crime, including

“drug dealing, robbery, extortion, and the distribution of counterfeit and contraband goods.”

There is also involvement in paramilitary style assaults, street disorder and violent protest.

In respect of the Provisional IRA, the assessment says:

“The structures of PIRA remain in existence in a much reduced form”—

including—

“a senior leadership, the ‘Provisional Army Council’ and some ‘departments’.”

The authors of the report do not believe that the group is actively recruiting. They state that, although decommissioning took place between 2001 and 2005, PIRA continues to have access to some weapons. However, the assessment judges

“that PIRA has not conducted organised procurement of new weaponry in the period since the last IMC report of 2011.”

While the assessment states that

“PIRA members believe that the PAC oversees both PIRA and Sinn Fein with an overarching strategy”—

it judges that—

“this has a wholly political focus.”

The report points out that

“individual PIRA members remain involved in criminal activity, such as large scale smuggling, and there have been isolated incidents of violence, including murders.”

In conclusion, the report says:

“The PIRA of the Troubles era is well beyond recall. It is our firm assessment that PIRA’s leadership remains committed to the peace process and its aim of achieving a united Ireland by political means. The group is not involved in targeting or conducting terrorist attacks against the state.”

That is a direct quote from the assessment.

I will not seek to hide from the House that much of the assessment makes uncomfortable reading. These organisations should never have existed in the first place and, 21 years after the first ceasefires, it is clearly unacceptable that they still exist today.

For all that the assessment judges the leaderships of the main paramilitary groups to be committed to peaceful

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means, such groupings have no place in a democratic society. Members of those groups continue to exert a malign influence, which, as the assessment puts it

“harms communities and damages the financial prosperity and reputation of Northern Ireland.”

Inevitably, a document of this kind does not provide all the answers, but I hope that it will assist in identifying the nature and scale of the problem and in framing the debate about the way forward. Working with the main political parties, and society more broadly, we need a strategy to lead us to the point where these organisations no longer exist and their influence is removed from Northern Ireland once and for all. That is one of the two main goals of the talks that I am chairing at Stormont and it is an outcome to which all parties say they are committed.

The other goal is to secure the implementation of the Stormont House agreement. I believe that those talks represent the best chance of making progress on both these vital issues and of finding a way forward that builds a brighter, more secure future for everyone in Northern Ireland. We all now need to engage intensively in the talks in the days ahead, and I commend this statement to the House.