

# Birmingham Six freedom sparks joy, concern

LONDON (CNS) — The release of six Irish men imprisoned nearly 17 years for a crime the British government now says they did not commit was welcomed by Catholic leaders who joined the effort to free the men.

But they also expressed sorrow it had taken so long to obtain that freedom.

At the same time, Britain's system of justice and the outlawed Irish Republican Army received some criticism from several quarters.

"My delight at the outcome of today's (March 14) Court of Appeal hearing is tinged with sadness that it has taken so long for the convictions to be quashed," said Cardinal George Basil Hume of Westminster. The cardinal was among the most prominent of public figures pressing for the release of the so-called Birmingham Six.

"Much of the credit must go to the many people both in this country and in Ireland who campaigned tirelessly on behalf of the Birmingham Six," he said.

British civil rights activists said the case of the Birmingham Six exposed deep-seated corruption in the police force and the unwillingness of the courts to believe such corruption exists. They warned there are no current guarantees against similar rights violations in the future.

Ireland's bishops expressed regret over the imprisonment of the six men and then blamed the ordeal on the outlawed Irish Republican Army.

"While we rejoice at the vindication of the innocence of the Birmingham Six, we do not forget the 21 people who were murdered by the Birmingham bombs," the statement said. "All these people and the six themselves were, directly or indirectly,



AP/Wide World Photos  
Supporters greet five of the "Birmingham Six" March 14 upon their release after 17 years in prison. London's Court of Appeals freed the group upon appeal of their sentence for the 1974 murder of 21 people killed in the bombing of a Birmingham pub. From left are: Richard McIlkenny, Hugh Callghan, John Walker (in doorway at rear), Patrick Hill (front center), and Billy Power (arm raised).

victims of the cruel campaign conducted by the IRA, which is still continuing to be waged against innocent victims.

"In the name of God and of the Catholic Church in Ireland we unreservedly condemn it," the statement said.

Ireland's president, Mary Robinson, and its prime minister, Charles Haughey, said they were pleased and relieved at the outcome of the appeal.

Bishop Edward Daly of Derry, Northern Ireland, said the release of the Birmingham Six "was a moment we've been waiting for many years. It was a moment of great

joy."

The six men — Hugh Callaghan, 60, Patrick Hill, 45, Gerard Hunter, 42, Richard McIlkenny, 57, William Power, 44, and John Walker, 55 — were wrongly convicted more than 16 years ago of the bombings of two taverns in Birmingham, England, in which 21 people were killed and 162 were wounded.

It was one of the IRA's bloodiest attacks. The organization publicly took responsibility for the act.

Some of the men confessed to the crime, but in court renounced those statements,

saying they had been coerced by police.

A three-judge panel quashed the murder convictions March 14 — an action which culminated years of appeals in public and through the courts by relatives and supporters of the six men. A previous appeal was filed in 1987 and rejected the following year.

The men were convicted largely on scientific evidence now considered unreliable and some police testimony described as "less than honest" by defense lawyers.

A senior government forensic scientist was forced into retirement after many of his findings, including those relating to the six Irishmen, were shown to be false, and an appeals court judge said police investigating the case had lied in presenting evidence.

A relative of McIlkenny said the attitude of the British police is "If you're Irish you're guilty before you open your mouth," he said.

Archbishop Maurice Couve de Murville of Birmingham said he felt "great joy" at the release of the six, adding, "I would like to commend them for their patience in seeking to prove their innocence."

Following the release, British Home Secretary Kenneth Baker announced that a Royal Commission would be established to review the country's criminal justice system.

Legal experts say the cases of the Birmingham Six and the "Guildford Four" — three Irishmen and a British woman freed in 1989 after spending 14 years in jail exposed police corruption and apparent reluctance among judges to believe it could occur.

## Walesa terms remarks 'clumsy'

WARSAW, Poland (CNS) — Reacting to public suspicions that he is anti-Semitic, Polish President Lech Walesa apologized March 14 for remarks he had made during his presidential campaign and said he blundered when he told a rally he was "clean" because he had no Jewish ancestors.

"I stumbled on this. I crashed into anti-Semitism. ... Twice I gave clumsy answers," Walesa said before leaving Poland for before official visits to the United States and Israel.

Asked if this was a confession of wrongdoing, he replied, "Right, right. It was just

clumsiness. I paid for using an unfortunate expression. I made jokes several times but only because I was sure nobody would accuse me of anti-Semitism.

"But it seems nobody is sacrosanct. Every unfortunate move is counted against you," he said.

A Catholic who became president in December, Walesa made campaign comments that have aroused suspicions that he shares the anti-Semitism attributed to many Poles.

Walesa denied heatedly that he was personally anti-Semitic and said Polish anti-

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