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Dear Prime Minister

RE: The Victims' Payment Scheme

On 4 March 1972 Jennifer and her sister had been shopping in Belfast. They decided to get a cup of coffee and some cake before they went home and at 4.30pm a no-warning bomb went off in the restaurant where they were sitting. In Jennifer's words;

"I was 21 years of age. I not only lost my legs but my future dreams and aspirations as well."

Jennifer is one of the inspirational individuals who campaigned for decades for a payment to acknowledge their pain and loss and to give them a better life. Another is Alex who as a young parent lost his livelihood, his home and his leg because of a car bomb.

Jennifer and Alex, represent the tip of the iceberg of those most severely and permanently injured. They suffered physically, psychologically and financially. They have walked a very long and painful road in their campaign for a Victims' Payment. This was an agonising journey over decades during which many of them have died.

Last December they succeeded; a payment for people who were permanently and severely injured in the conflict was part of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019.

We are also writing to remind the 650 MPs that citizens living in their constituencies throughout the United Kingdom should also be able to apply for this payment.

This was a moment of acknowledgement, of feeling that society did care. Though for Jennifer and the others like her there was always a fear that something could still go wrong; they had experienced decades of promises not delivered on and hopes that were followed by disappointment.

And as the anticipated implementation date of 29th May has now passed, these people have been let down again. They are witnessing a failure to open the scheme

and a disgraceful public debate between politicians in Northern Ireland and in Westminster over who should pay.

As Commissioner and on the strongest advice of the victims and survivors forum I write this open letter to really articulate to you the impact of this on victims and survivors. Paul Gallagher, a members of the Victims and Survivors Forum who has suffered decades of pain and severe disability after being shot in his home by gunmen summed up the collective feeling of devastation,

“This has been the toughest week of my life so far. I feel devastated – physically and emotionally. To see something I was overjoyed to achieve not happen as it was supposed to, is shattering.”

It is cruel, callous and insulting that this shameful stand-off played out in public is undoing the acknowledgement of pain, suffering and loss that the Victims Payment was to deliver. It has become the ultimate insult to those victims and survivors who campaigned for years to be acknowledged, respected and valued.

It is not good enough.

Twenty two years after the Belfast Agreement was signed, we are still seeing lives devastated by legacy issues, pain passed down through families, and communities torn apart by mental health crises, substance misuse, domestic and sectarian violence. This law, passed in Westminster, will do something to make life better for those who suffered the most.

It is our expectation that this legislation is implemented immediately.

Judith Thompson

Judith Thompson
Commissioner for Victims and Survivors