

New appointment for Nottingham Law Professor

The co-director of Nottingham University's Human Rights Law centre, Professor Michael O'Flaherty, has recently been appointed as the new Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. He will replace the current Commissioner, Monica McWilliams, in September.

The NIHRC was created by the 1998 Northern Ireland Act, as part of the Belfast Agreement. Its primary role has been to promote an awareness of human rights, and to advise the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on the appropriate legislative measures needed to ensure their protection. Secretary of State Owen Paterson announced the appointments on Monday, with O'Flaherty being joined by seven part-time Commissioners.

Mr Paterson stated that, 'twelve years after its establishment, the commission continues to face a range of challenges that are changing as Northern Ireland society changes.' He is 'confident that the new chief commissioner and commissioners will help meet these challenges.'

In related news, the European Court of Human Rights has recently, 'in the case of *Al-Skeini and Others v. the United Kingdom*, found that the UK's human rights obligations apply to its acts in Iraq, and that the UK had violated the European Convention on Human Rights in the failure to adequately investigate the killings of five Iraqis by its forces there.'

The senior legal advisor of Human Rights Watch, Clive Baldwin said: 'Britain can't claim its soldiers have no human rights duties once they are in another country. The British government should now finally accept human rights law applies to its acts anywhere in the world and ensure a full and independent inquiry into all these killings.'

The case concerned the killings of five Iraqi civilians in Basra in 2003, when the UK was an occupying power. Human Rights Watch reports that the 'families of the victims complained to the [European Court] that the UK authorities had refused to conduct an independent and thorough investigation into the circumstances of the killings.' The UK was ordered to pay €17,000 to members of the five families.

The Court 'rejected unconscionable double standards governing the conduct of states, depending on whether their agents act within or outside that state's territory. The judgment represents a major reassertion of core values such as the universality of human rights, the rule of law, and the right to life.'

The ruling has been met with silence in most of the mainstream, including the BBC. The Guardian's Owen Bowcott, however, believes that this will add 'to the pressure for further public inquiries into the behaviour of troops in and around Basra after the 2003 invasion.'