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TUESDAY 21/11/2006 12:28:00
Hain has Downing Street support

Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain still has the confidence of the British Prime Minister, Downing Street has said.

By: Press Association

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The support comes following the launch of an inquiry into whether the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) deliberately misled the High Court in Belfast.

The case centres on a judicial review into whether the British government`s appointment of the interim Victims` Commissioner in Northern Ireland, Bertha McDougall, was correctly handled and whether incorrect information was given to a woman who challenged the appointment.

The British Attorney General, Lord Goldsmith, announced yesterday that he would carry out an investigation after receiving a request from a High Court judge in Belfast.

The British Prime Minister`s official spokesman today refused to be drawn on Lord Goldsmith`s inquiry.

"The Secretary of State has said that he will co-operate fully with the investigation," the spokesman said.

"The Attorney General is looking at this matter. I think it is important that we let him."

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Asked if Mr Hain still had the Prime Minister`s confidence, the spokesman said: "Yes".

It was disclosed yesterday that Lord Goldsmith had received a memo from Mr Justice Girvan listing 67 questions he needed to ask to get to the bottom of the matter.

Mr Hain has denied any wrongdoing, saying that he absolutely rejected any suggestion that there was a deliberate attempt to mislead the court.

The controversy has centred around the appointment by Mr Hain in October last year of Bertha McDougall, the widow of a police officer murdered by republicans, as interim Victims` Commissioner.

The appointment was challenged at a judicial review by Brenda Downes, the widow of a west Belfast man killed by a police plastic bullet in 1984.

The Goldsmith inquiry centres around a letter sent to Mrs Downes by the government in response to a question about the appointments process which was made under the Freedom of Information Act.

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