



Bertha McDougall

THURSDAY
25/01/2007
11:42:45

Victim's relatives should get £8m says Bertha McDougall

Families of people killed or injured in Northern Ireland's Troubles before 1988 should receive £2,000 a year to help rebuild their shattered lives, a report has recommended.

By: Press Association

Former Interim Victims' Commissioner Bertha McDougall, whose controversial appointment by the Government is the subject of an inquiry ordered by Attorney General Lord Goldsmith, proposed that all families of those murdered and survivors should share a new £8 million fund.

Mrs McDougall, whose Royal Ulster Constabulary reservist husband Lindsay, 36, was shot dead by republicans in Belfast city centre in 1981, also recommended, in a 140-page report, setting up a fund for the families of Ulster Defence Regiment members killed. It would be the same as the Northern Ireland Police Fund, which distributes money to the families of murdered officers.

She also advocated establishing a victims' forum highlighting issues of concern and a role for their representatives on bodies responsible for community planning when local government reforms come into effect in 2009.

Mrs McDougall said: "I have stated my view, and that of many in the sector, that funding has been insufficient. However, I have also pointed out that there is an issue of how effectively current funding is used."

Pre-1988 victims face extra hardship because changes to the law made special financial allowance for those affected after that year. She criticised the Government's "fragmented" approach to helping those suffering from trauma, arguing that the methods of delivering services were too complex.

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More than 3600 people have been killed in the violence of Northern Ireland since 1969. Around 90% were men and three-quarters under the age of 40, with an estimated 40,000-50,000 injured.

They include members of the security forces and civilians shot and bombed by the IRA as well as other republican and loyalist paramilitaries.

Mrs McDougall made 36 recommendations, including calling for the abolition of the current Government-backed memorial fund for trauma sufferers.

It was set up in 1999 and received at least £3 million in official resources.

Under the new proposals, payments to spouses of UDR dead or injured would be similar to the Northern Ireland Police Fund, which helps injured police, retired officers, widows and families.

The move is likely to prove controversial, with republicans accusing the force of sectarian killings and unionists campaigning for better recognition of their sacrifice.

A total of 206 soldiers from the UDR and their 1992 replacement, the Royal Irish Regiment, died between 1971 and 1994, the year of the IRA's first ceasefire.

Mrs McDougall defended her proposal to make special provision for UDR families.

She said: "My report has been looking at individual victims... I am addressing the needs of everyone. I have said that I base this on need."

She added that the existing system of providing support was facing financial and logistical difficulties.

"Government's service delivery model for providing services to victims and survivors is too complex and is not meeting needs appropriately.

"Provision of services for those suffering from trauma-related conditions is fragmented, lacking overall co-ordination and varies across Northern Ireland and the attempts by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to deal with these issues have not yet borne fruit."

She said services needed to be brought under the NHS's wing and demanded improved access to therapy for those suffering from chronic pain as well as better training of professionals like GPs to help diagnose trauma illnesses.

"Frequently they are treated with disdain and frequently as second-class citizens," she added.

"Compounding this is the fact that there is still a lack of trust of the statutory sector amongst victims and survivors."

Mrs McDougall's year-long term in office ended on December 5 last year amid controversy about Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain's decision

to appoint her.

A legal challenge in Belfast`s High Court led Lord Justice Girvan to brand the Royal Ulster Constabulary widow`s nomination "improper and politically motivated".

Lord Goldsmith has ordered an inquiry into the affair but Mr Hain appealed the ruling that the appointment was unlawful to the Court of Appeal.

The Government advertised for the permanent Commissioner today and hopes to make the appointment by April. The nominee will be paid £65,000 a year.

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