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### Victims left outraged at amnesty plan for killers

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#### Proposal is a 'travesty' of justice

Wednesday, January 09, 2008

By Lesley-Anne Henry

A controversial proposal to give paramilitary killers an amnesty has sparked an angry reaction from Troubles' victims.

The Consultative Group, set up to deal with Ulster's violent past, mooted the idea of an amnesty in return for participating in a truth recovery process on Monday.

The group, headed by Church of Ireland Primate Robin Eames and former priest Denis Bradley has also suggested that the British Government may be asked to formally say it fought a war against the IRA.

However victims have branded the move a travesty.

Michael Gallagher, whose 21-year-old son Aiden was among the 29 people killed by the Omagh bomb said he believed the victims had been ignored.

He said: "I think if an amnesty is allowed to go ahead this would be a travesty to the victims. As always it is never the victims who are allowed to decide.

"If this government gives an amnesty to people who targeted innocent people then their families should be afforded the right to take a civil action paid for by the government. That's the only way they would get justice.

"If the conflict is going to be recognised as a war and the people who targeted innocent civilians are recognised as soldiers then under the Geneva Convention that is a war crime and the government should give the right of redress to the victims' families through a civil action."

Raymond McCord, whose son Raymond Jnr was gunned down by the UVF, said: "Why should people get an amnesty for taking somebody's life? Why should we have a different law than the rest of the UK?"

He said the Government is saying the law doesn't include terrorists in Northern Ireland and again the victims here don't have a voice and are being ignored.

Willie Frazer of the victim's group FAIR said his office had been inundated with callers against the proposals and that an amnesty would re-open wounds and create more bitterness.

"People are disgusted. They can't believe that this is even being considered. If we allow an accepted amnesty we will allow the legitimisation of the murders of our loved ones. That is something we will not accept. It is a step too far," he said.

However Jude Whyte, whose mother was killed by a UVF bomb, wants to move forward.

"What Denis Bradley and Robin Eames are doing is asking people together to cross the Rubicon and forgive, not to forget, but to hand the next generation something better."

Terry Spence, Chairman of the Police Federation, which represents 9,500 officers said an amnesty was an "utterly scandalous" betrayal of the sacrifice of thousands of members.

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He said: "We will be making a submission on behalf of the Federation and the wider police family to the Eames/Bradley Group but we could not allow such wholly inappropriate ideas to go unchallenged at this stage."

Former RUC Special Branch officer Jonty Brown, who helped put ousted UFF boss Johnny Adair behind bars, described the proposal as "ill advised" .

He said the PSNI's Historical Enquiries Team, set up to look at cases from the Troubles should not be robbed of the chance of bringing people to justice.

He said: "All I can say is that we have gone far enough in our bid to bring people aboard. While we have to put the past behind us, it would be a step too far. There are police officers all over the world who celebrate when they clear a cold case.

"You can't just draw a line somewhere. Tell the woman that screamed, and screamed and screamed because she didn't hug her son the last time she saw him and I'm standing telling her he's dead. Those screams are still in her head, believe me."

Meanwhile, former republican prisoner Michael Culbert, who served 16 years in Long Kesh from 1978 to 1993 said while an amnesty was "never on the list of priorities" for republicans, it would be welcome.

He said: "There were about 17,000 republican prisoners so there couldn't be that many left to receive an amnesty.

"If it comes, it comes and I would welcome it. But what we are looking for more, is the erasion of a criminal prison record. We have no problem in having a prison record, in fact we are proud of having served time for our cause, but what we are opposed to is the attached criminality. The sooner we get rid of that the better."

Mike Ritchie director of republican ex-prisoner group Coiste na n-Irchimi, said an amnesty would be welcome.

"We have always been in favour of an amnesty. I know it is a controversial position but we feel it is a logistical step, following on from prisoners being released early. It is recognition that they should not have been in jail in the first place.

"Research that we've done shows that well over 10% of the population of west Belfast had been in jail, now that's not a bunch of 'crims' - they were political prisoners.

"It's a logical extension that if the war is over then there should be an amnesty."

Murdered solicitor Pat Finucane's youngest son John, said: "To be honest it seems like it is just speculation as to whether or not they are going to recommend an amnesty.

"The work of this group will stand or fall on its final recommendations.

"An amnesty, however, really has no relevance on what we are pursuing, which is an independent inquiry with full powers into my father's death."

Briege Voyle, whose mother, Joan Connolly, was shot dead by members of the Parachute Regiment in Ballymurphy in 1971, said obtaining the truth was the most important objective.

Briege, who was 14 at the time of her mother's death said: "It's the truth that we are after. We need someone to sit down and tell us what happened on that day.

"The British Army has already given themselves an amnesty anyway. They were a law unto themselves."

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