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By Lesley-Anne Henry
Friday, 31 October 2008

The head of the Parades Commission last night defended the decision to allow a republican protest near the route of an Army homecoming event this weekend.

There are widespread fears that Sunday's Royal Irish Regiment parade in Belfast could spark trouble with large crowds of demonstrators and supporters set to descend on the city centre.

The Parades Commission, which has come under criticism from unionists after allowing a Sinn Fein organised protest to assemble around 50m from the Army event, said last night it would not be reviewing its decision.

Chairman Roger Poole said there was not "sufficient new information" to

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warrant a review.

“We were asked by political representatives to have a review but we have to operate within a legal process for the commission and that means there has to be new information to bring about a review and there wasn't sufficient new information so we haven't had a review.

“What we have done is create some space so that people can now take stock of where we are. Everybody wants a peaceful day in Belfast on Sunday and it's crucial that we should have it. This place has made great advances in the last few years. The last thing we want is a return to anything bad of the sort that we have had in years gone by,” he said.

Thousands of people are expected to turn out in Belfast city centre to support the soldiers from the Royal Irish Regiment, the RAF and the Royal Navy while thousands more are expected to join the Sinn Fein protest 40 metres away. There are also expected to be a number of unofficial protests.

All week concerns have been mounting over the prospect of violence during the parade and Mr Poole made a last ditch plea for peace.

“There is an onus on political and community leaders and people of influence to demonstrate leadership between now and Sunday through their words, actions and their commitment to non-violent action. If they do that and people take note then we can get through Sunday and this place can go on making the progress it has been making over the last few years.

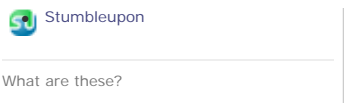
There are fears that dissident republicans, who are expected to stage illegal protests, could cause serious disruptions. Fears have also been expressed that loyalists could also cause disruption.

Mr Poole added: “There is always the potential for violence in situations like this. All we want to do is to ensure that the homecoming parade, which a lot of people in this society want to go out to see, can take place. The legitimate protest by Sinn Fein can take place as well, and that everybody has a peaceful day.

“The police can deal with those people who might want to come into this city to have an illegal parade or an illegal protest. Now there are two legal parades and a legal protest on the roads on Sunday. They ought to go off peacefully and we want the police to be able to concentrate on those few people who want to come into this city in order to do other things.

“We do know that there are people in this society who will still come into Belfast, perhaps on Sunday, in order to do something else. Now I would ask them to stay away from Belfast. Belfast wants a peaceful day on Sunday.

“I think we have done everything that we could ahead of Sunday's parade. I don't think we want any arguments on Monday about whose fault it is if anything were to go wrong. What we want to do is to ensure that over the next 48 hours that wiser counsels prevail and that everybody says the right things to try and ensure that we have a peaceful day on Sunday.”



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