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By Jonathan McCambridge
Saturday, 15 November 2008

Police last night insisted that the unit set up to investigate more than 3,000 unsolved murders will not close despite admitting that it faces financial difficulties.

It is understood that some staff at the Historical Enquiries Team will receive one month's notice this week and operations carried out by the team of detectives will have to be dramatically scaled back.

The cash crisis came about after the unit was told by the Government that it would not get any further funds within the current financial year. It had been expected that the HET would receive some of next year's cash allocation in advance.

This means that the detectives have £2m to spend in the next five months and this could impact badly on major investigations.

The HET team have been working on several high profile cold case

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murder investigations.

What are these?

A special police squad set up by HET has been investigating killings by Mark Haddock's murderous Mount Vernon gang. The team are re-investigating 19 murders, 14 attempted murders and 25 punishment shootings by the gang between 1991 and 2003.

Earlier this year, in the first case brought to court by the HET, two men appeared in court charged with the murder of UDA boss Tommy English eight years ago. It is understood that the funding spent on the Haddock investigation has left the HET short of cash to deal with other cold cases.

Last night a HET source told the Belfast Telegraph: "We may have to scale back operations in the current financial year."

But a unit spokeswoman insisted that despite the cash problems, the HET would not close.

She said: "In the current environment the Historical Enquiries Team is, like other agencies, facing serious financial pressures. We are in discussion with relevant agencies to work through this difficult time and remain committed to doing the best for the families who engage with the HET."

It is understood that some workers will receive their notice within days. Negotiations are ongoing to secure further funding.

Sources have insisted that there is no intention for it to close and have also pointed out that funding is set aside for the unit in the next financial year.

A PSNI spokeswoman added: "Any extra resources sought by the PSNI for the work of the Historical Enquiries Team in this financial year has to be judged against the overall challenging financial position. Funding issues are currently subject to ongoing discussions involving the PSNI, the Policing Board and the NIO."

In 2006 the PSNI set up the 180-strong Historical Enquiries Team to investigate 3,268 deaths during the Troubles in Northern Ireland — a unique venture.

The team of detectives is based at Ravernet in Lisburn and police, at the time, said more than £30m of funding had been made available to it over six years.

However, the unit was beset by financial problems almost from the beginning. Staff were left unhappy two years ago after it emerged that some of their funding would be diverted to the Police Ombudsman to carry out historical investigations into alleged killings carried out by the security forces.

The Chief Constable has stated in the past that more money is needed if the detectives are to complete their massive task of re-examining evidence of thousands of Troubles murders and presenting their findings to families.

The unit is under the command of retired Metropolitan Police Commander Dave Cox. It was originally supposed to run for six years but Mr Cox has said this would not be long enough to complete the work.

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Why not give the money that was offered to the UDA and the UVF for decommissioning to the HET. Everyone knows that the UDA and the UVF will never have the integrity to alienate themselves from their normal behavior: i.e. drugs, racketeering and sectarian violence.

Posted by *McRee* | 15.11.08, 16:48 GMT

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