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Loyalist feud victim's family 'received threat'

Friday, 6 February 2009

Murdered loyalist leader Tommy English's family were threatened for co-operating with police investigating his shooting, a court heard yesterday.

It was also claimed that one of the men accused of killing the UDA chief has become a born-again Christian.

Details emerged as Samuel Higgins (33) and Philip Laffin (31) were refused bail due to concern about interference with witnesses.

District Judge Fiona Bagnall rejected their applications after being told detectives investigating the assassination of Mr English at his home in October 2000 may make further arrests.

So far 11 men have been charged in connection with the murder, carried out during a UDA-UVF feud which claimed seven lives.

They include Newtownabbey brothers David Stewart (38) and Robert Stewart (34), who pleaded guilty to aiding and abetting, and made statements implicating the other suspects.

Prosecuting counsel David Russell told Belfast Magistrates Court it was alleged that Higgins, of The Meadow, Antrim, and Laffin, from Bridge Street in the town, were both present at a meeting to plan Mr English's murder.

Laffin was assigned to the four-man team who were to hijack a taxi for the shooting, it was claimed. Higgins, also known as Samuel Agnew, was given a bottle of white spirit with orders to burn the car after the shooting, according to Mr Russell.

However, the court heard the liquid was misplaced and the vehicle was never set on fire.

Mr Russell said: "It's the prosecution case that both Laffin and Agnew, along with others, had full knowledge because of their attendance at the planning meeting.

"This was to be an attack carried out in revenge for the murder of another person and it was to take place later that day." Objecting to bail for the pair, who deny involvement in the killing, the barrister claimed they were capable of violence and intimidation against anyone in their way.

He revealed that a day after a co-accused appeared in court, a direct threat was made to members of the English family.

"They were threatened if that co-operation (with police) continued they would have to face the consequences," Mr Russell said.

"The prosecution fear strongly that there will be attempts to interfere with witnesses or the family of the deceased by members of this gang." Confirming further arrests were possible, the barrister expressed concern over contacts he said Laffin may have outside Northern Ireland.

He said: "During police interviews he stated that he has become a born-again Christian and has worked in Africa until recently." Mr Russell added that the personal safety of Laffin and Higgins may be under threat.

Mark Farrell for Laffin, presented the court with references for his client from a pastor at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in north Belfast and the Befrienders charity for the disabled.

Refusing both men bail, Mrs Bagnall said: "I'm gravely concerned in the context of this offence at matters put before the court in relation to interference with witnesses.

"I'm told the investigation is still ongoing and there's a live possibility of further arrests. This leads me to the conclusion that there's a real and clear possibility of obstruction to justice."

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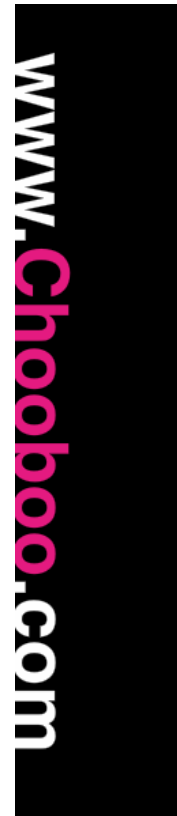
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