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Time to end the long years of agony

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These are anxious days for the family of Danny McIlhone, the west Belfast man abducted and killed by the IRA in 1981.

It could take some considerable time for DNA tests to confirm if partial remains of a body found in bogland in the Co Wicklow hills are his. Twice already extensive, but fruitless, digs have taken place in the area in an attempt to find his body after information had been passed to the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains. Perhaps this

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time the family's 27 years of  desperate desire to find their loved one's body will have ended.

Mr McIlhone was one of the nine people murdered by the IRA and buried in secret locations. They became known as the Disappeared. The bodies of four have been found but, so far, the information provided on the possible burial sites of the others has not been sufficiently detailed to enable police and specialist search teams to find them.

The saga of the Disappeared — there are also a number of other people missing, presumed killed by republicans — is one of the most shameful parts of Northern Ireland's recent history. To abduct and kill any person for any reason is damning enough, but to compound such a crime by then burying the body in a secret location denying the bereaved relatives even the comfort of a Christian burial showed the depths to which the IRA sank during its terror campaign.

The only way that republicans can make any slight reparation for these evil deeds is by giving as much evidence as possible to the Independent Commission. Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams recently told the Northern Ireland Assembly that, even as

he spoke, IRA members were endeavouring to furnish the commission with additional information. It is known that some former IRA men, including those responsible for the abduction, murder and burial of some of the Disappeared, have been to remote sites in an effort to pinpoint the actual graves.

The passage of time, changes in the landscape, lapses of memory, the fact that the burials probably took place in darkness and, possibly, the death of some of those directly involved in the killings all make the job of locating the graves a very difficult task. Yet every effort must continue to be made for

the sake of the bereaved relatives. What they have endured is beyond the comprehension of most of us.

The tales of some who have spoken out over the years reveal a little of their heartache. They told how, at first, they refused to believe their loved ones were dead. Some, acting on fruitless tip-offs, spent countless hours over several years following up reported sightings. Even when reason dictated otherwise, there was the hope that some day a door would open and the missing person would return. Parents and other relatives went to their own graves still grieving and still wondering.

Now that Sinn Fein is a partner in government in Northern Ireland and will help to choose the new policing and justice minister, there is a moral imperative on republicans to end, where possible, the grief of the relatives of the Disappeared. It is unthinkable that any information, however slight, would be held back from the Independent Commission. Republicans cannot expunge their sordid past, but they can show a little humanity even at this very late stage.

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