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Local & National

We didn't conceal Wright death threat: MI5 chief

Thursday, March 13, 2008

The head of MI5 in Northern Ireland at the time of Billy Wright's death has denied a death threat against the LVF leader was deliberately withheld from Ministers.

But the retired intelligence chief told the inquiry into Wright's murder that he could not explain why the Secretary of State and Security Minister were not told about the INLA threat - when they were considering moving Wright into an INLA H-Block at the Maze prison.

MI5 learned from an informer in April 1997 that INLA inmates would kill Wright "at the first opportunity" if he was moved from the Maze to Maghaberry.

That warning was passed to the RUC, according to MI5 records, but never reached the Prison Service, Secretary of State Sir Patrick Mayhew or Security Minister Sir John Wheeler.

Days later, they moved Wright into the Maze, where he set up an LVF wing in the same H-Block as the INLA.

Eight months later he was shot dead by three INLA prisoners.

The inquiry investigating the murder heard yesterday from the Director and Co-ordinator of Intelligence, the most senior MI5 man in Northern Ireland.

The witness, known only as DC11, received memos discussing Wright's proposed move to the Maze at the same time that his staff discovered the threat.

Alan Kane QC, appearing for the Wright family, asked the intelligence chief: "Who or what failed to marry up the discussions about Billy Wright with the intelligence?"

"I'm not putting my hands in the air. Clearly the system could have worked better," the MI5 chief said.

Mr Kane said: "It seems incredible that the things didn't come together. "

"Looking back it may seem incredible. I can't explain," the former MI5 man said.

The director said he would have expected the RUC to pass the warning on to the Prison Service.

"We tended to work through others to make sure the right information was delivered to the Prison Service," he said.

He added that his "recollection of these events is very small".






Derek Batchelor QC, counsel for the inquiry, told the MI5 officer: " Either there was a deliberate decision not to send it, to ignore it, or things went badly wrong."

The spy chief responded: "I would absolutely disagree if there was a suggestion that there was some to attempt to withhold it and given the wider distribution in the RUC, it wouldn't make sense."

The inquiry also heard that the RUC believed Wright could inflict " significant damage" on the peace process and wanted to target him for prosecution. In July 1996, when Wright became prominent in the Drumcree protest, police spoke to MI5 about using covert surveillance to collect evidence against Wright.

A memo to the head of MI5, written by the Director and Co-ordinator of Intelligence, said: "We would also wish to have some corroboration of the RUC assessment that the activities of Wright are capable of inflicting such significant damage on the peace process."

"Whether or not we agree to mount an operation as envisaged by the RUC is a decision that can only be

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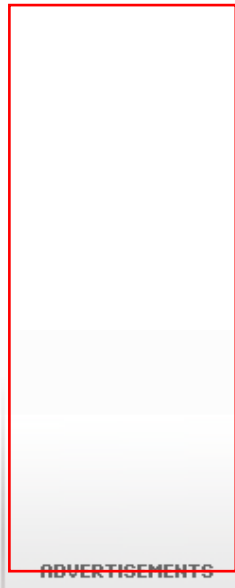
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