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Police witnesses want to remain in shadows

Saturday, 14 March 2009

Police witnesses at public inquiries in Northern Ireland have lodged new applications for anonymity following the murders of an officer and two soldiers by dissident republicans, the High Court has heard.

A lawyer also claimed that the authorities who deal with threat assessments for those appearing at the hearings are currently under heavy pressure.

Details emerged as the possibility was raised of a further delay in the inquest into the death of an IRA man shot dead by the RUC in west Belfast 16 years ago.

The parents of Pearse Jordan were challenging a decision by senior coroner John Leckey to grant anonymity and screening to 15 serving and former police officers due to give evidence at the hearing in June.

But a judge was told that Mr Leckey has now decided to reconsider their applications under a different process.

Jordan (22) was gunned down in disputed circumstances following a car collision on the Falls Road in November 1992.

With a four-week inquest into his killing listed for June, Nicolas Hanna QC, for the Coroner said the new procedure would be in place quickly.

However, responding to a question about the impact on the scheduled hearing date, he pointed out: "My understanding is that the authorities who are responsible for producing threat assessments and advice of that kind are under a great deal of pressure at the minute."

The court heard it has been taking up to three months to complete the analysis of risk levels for officers due to appear at public hearings such as the probe into the murder of Robert Hamill, a Catholic man kicked to death in Portadown in 1997.

Mr Hanna referred to developments since the murders of PSNI Constable Stephen Carroll in Craigavon and two soldiers at Massereene Barracks in Antrim.

He said: "In the Hamill Inquiry, and possibly some of the other inquiries, police officers not granted anonymity and screening have now applied for it in light of events of the past week." The lawyer told the court these could take up to 12 weeks to process.

"The more people seek assessments, the more the authorities come under time pressure," he added. "All we are saying is that June is looking unrealistic, but I can't be more clear than that." Mr Justice Weatherup awarded costs for the legal challenge to the Jordans.

He said: "As a consequence of the examination of the process in this judicial review it has been decided that the matter should be re-processed."

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