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British-Irish meeting gets high security

Monday, 23 March 2009

A major security operation is moving into place to protect dozens of senior British and Irish politicians meeting at a lakeside hotel in Co Donegal next week.

The British-Parliamentary Assembly (Bipa) is convening as police investigations continue into the murder by dissident terrorists of two soldiers and a policeman in Northern Ireland earlier this month.

Politicians gathering at Solis Lough Eske Castle Hotel near Donegal will be discussing issues around the 1998 Omagh bombing and efforts to address the legacy of the Troubles.

Co-chairman Niall Blaney said there were immediate concerns relating to security matters following the recent gun attacks.

The Garda will have overall responsibility for security and policing of the Bipa event, but is expected to receive close co-operation from the PSNI.

Mr Blaney, an Irish government TD for Donegal North East, said he has discussed the security issue with Bipa co-chair, former Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain, who will also be attending the high-level political forum.

"Discussions were held around the issue. There is concern about recent events and we must ensure security is stepped up," said Mr Blaney.

Senior TDs, MPs and members of the House of Lords will be attending the 38th plenary session of Bipa on March 29-31, as well as parliamentarians from Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands.

Guest speakers will include Irish deputy Taoiseach Mary Coughlan and secretary of state for Wales Paul Murphy.

Co-chairmen of the Consultative Group on the Past, Lord Eames and Denis Bradley, who recently made a direct plea for co-operation from the IRA, will discuss their work with politicians.

Bipa members will also discuss calls for the British government to release all intelligence files in relation to the Omagh bombing, which killed 29 people.

Other issues tabled for discussion include renewable energy, national ID cards and the integration of migrant workers.

Stormont's minister for finance and personnel and DUP deputy leader Nigel Dodds will also address the Bipa, as well as Ulster Unionist Party deputy leader Danny Kennedy.

Unionists boycotted the Bipa for almost 20 years until a number of politicians including Lord Maginnis, a former Ulster Unionist MP, attended the 37th plenary session in Newcastle in November.

Bipa, formerly the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, was established in 1990 as a link between Westminster and Dublin.

It originally had 25 British and 25 Irish members drawn from the upper and lower houses of both Parliaments.

In recent years membership of the body has been extended, with representatives from the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament, the Isle of Man and Channel Islands.

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