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Families of victims plea after Panorama claims

By Lisa Smyth
Tuesday, 16 September 2008

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Families of victims of the Omagh bomb today demanded a government probe into the alleged existence of potentially damning evidence against those behind the atrocity.

Relatives involved in a landmark civil action — who were due to return to the High Court in Belfast today — were expected to hold a press conference in Belfast beforehand to react to claims made in last night's BBC Panorama programme.

Following allegations that the government possesses recordings of telephone conversations by some of those believed to be responsible for the deadly explosion, Michael Gallagher, chairman of the Omagh Support and Self Help Group, called for any such recordings to be released so they can be used in the civil action. During the programme, it was revealed that British Security Services have had in their possession evidence that helps identify some of those responsible for the car bomb attack in Omagh by the Real IRA in August 1998.

The explosion killed 31 people and injured 220. It was Ireland's worst single terrorist atrocity. To date, no-one has been successfully convicted for the massacre.

Panorama's investigation uncovered that on the day of the attack Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) was covertly recording mobile telephone communications between the bombers on their journey into Omagh.

The fact of the phone calls, as opposed to their content, is currently a live issue in the civil action trial. From these recordings, the identities of individuals involved could be identified, not least from the conversations and their voices.

This evidence has never been made available for the purpose of a criminal prosecution nor the public even made aware of its existence.

The civil action offers an opportunity for the authorities to right the wrongs of the past, the Omagh Support and Self Help Group has claimed. Mr Gallagher said: "This news is simply earth shattering for us. Putting aside the need for a public inquiry — were the recordings being monitored in real time in which case could the bomb have been stopped — if not in real time, why were the tapes not provided as intelligence to the investigators to advance their investigations?"

"Putting aside whether the law will ever allow these recordings to be used as evidence in a criminal prosecution — should they not be now conveniently destroyed, it is legally and morally imperative that the authorities provide this evidence to be aired in the civil action."

Jason McCue, lawyer for the families involved in the civil trial, declined to comment on the case as it is ongoing. However, he said that the families intend to fight to ensure any such intelligence recordings are brought before the High Court.

He said: "Having not heard the recordings, it is not prudent to speculate on its content. However, it is clear

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to state that such evidence is highly relevant. If Panorama's evidence is correct, it is hard to imagine a more moral case for the authorities needing to make amends to the victims."

"Providing such evidence might go some way to achieving that. If relevant evidence is not voluntarily provided, we are instructed to issue subpoenas."

Meanwhile Sinn Féin MP for West Tyrone Pat Doherty has again called for an independent all Ireland inquiry to be put in place to investigate the circumstances leading up to the Omagh bomb and the subsequent investigation.

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