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Local & National

McGuinness and Paisley miss another deadline

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Thursday, January 03, 2008

By Chris Thornton

First Ministers Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness have missed another target in their long-running struggle to appoint a Victims Commissioner.

The Ministers had insisted for the past three months that they hoped to name the new Commissioner by the end of 2007.

That was after previously telling Assembly members that they intended to make the appointment by July.

The First Ministers' Office insists that "any announcement" about the job will first be made to the Assembly - which raises further questions about the timing.

On December 10, Mr Paisley repeated that they intended to make an announcement before the end of the year - when there was only one sitting day left in the year to tell the Assembly.

The earliest an announcement can now be made is January 14, when the Assembly returns.

The Victims' Commissioners' post has been a controversial and long running saga.

The permanent post for a Commissioner for Victims and Survivors was first advertised a year ago this month. Some shortlisted candidates have been waiting 11 months for news of the job.

Interim Victims' Commissioner Bertha McDougall - nominated by Mr Paisley before he was First Minister, at the NIO's invitation - had her appointment declared illegal by the High Court in late 2006.

That ruling, which is currently being reviewed by the Court of Appeal, said Mrs McDougall had been illegally appointed as a political favour to the DUP, even though she was unaware that was taking place.

In January 2007, the NIO advertised the full time post.

Thirteen candidates were interviewed in February, and officials narrowed them down to a shortlist of six.

That list was presented to Mr Paisley and Mr McGuinness on May 8, the day they took up office.

Questioned about the appointment in the Assembly several weeks later, they said they hoped to make an announcement before the Assembly rose for its summer recess in July.

That announcement did not come. In October - after considering the shortlist for five months - they announced a second round of applications.

They said they feared some potential candidates had been put off from applying the first time around because the NIO was running the competition.

The Ministers denied that suggestions they could not agree on a suitable candidate.

They said previously shortlisted candidates would still be eligible for the job, but would now be required to make a presentation to the First Ministers.

One candidate - former Alliance MLA Seamus Close - withdrew at that stage, saying the appointments process had become tainted.

On December 10, Mr Paisley told the Assembly that the appointments process is "almost complete, and we hope to announce the appointment before the end of the year."

The next day was the final sitting day for the Assembly in 2007.

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The Office of the First and Deputy First Minister did not offer an explanation for the delay yesterday.


"Any announcement on the appointment of a Commissioner for Victim and Survivors will be made to the Assembly in the first instance," a spokeswoman admitted.


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