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Local & National

QC begins interviews in probe into alleged NIO cover-up

Monday, May 07, 2007

By Chris Thornton

A QC representing the Attorney General was due to begin interviewing witnesses in Belfast today to find out if the NIO hid evidence to cover up an illegal deal with the DUP.

Peter Scott QC has made special arrangements to interview one of five witnesses on the bank holiday for his review linked to the appointment of the Victims' Commissioner.

The review was sparked by a High Court judge's concerns that the NIO attempted to pervert the course of justice by hiding Peter Hain's decision to appoint Bertha McDougall to the post as a favour to the DUP.

Two other witnesses will be interviewed in Belfast later this week, and two other witnesses will speak to Mr Scott the following week.

Mr Hain is not the witness being interviewed today, although it is not clear if he will take part in any of the following interviews.

Mr Hain pledged the NIO's full co-operation with the review when it was launched in December, but officials consistently refused to discuss what role the Secretary of State may play in it.

They say the interviews are "a matter for the review".

Mr Scott's review team has so far refused to give any details of its work, referring all questions to the Attorney General's office.

Last year Lord Justice Girvan criticised Mr Hain and his two most senior civil servants for their handling of the court case about Mrs McDougall's appointment.

He said the NIO had relied on "obviously misleading" information to defend the appointment of Bertha McDougall. He said Mr Hain had illegally appointed Mrs McDougall as a sop to the DUP.

The judge said evidence showed there could have been an attempt to pervert the course of justice during the case - saying that "for some reason it was decided within Government that incorrect and misleading information would be supplied" to the court.

Mr Hain has welcomed the review, insisting there was "no question" of an attempt to deliberately mislead the court.

Mr Scott's interviews are follow-ups to detailed questionnaires he submitted to 17 witnesses about the case.






Those questionnaires are believed to have been based on 67 questions Lord Justice Girvan posed about the NIO's conduct in one of his rulings.

Mr Scott's review is being taken to the High Court next week by Brenda Downes, the Belfast widow of Sean Downes who was killed by a plastic bullet in 1984

She is asking the court to order Mr Scott to give her updates about his work and access to the documents he has received.

Mr Scott has offered to meet Mrs Downes, but has turned down her request for details about how he is conducting the review.


Next week could see a preliminary hearing of Mr Hain's appeal against the original ruling that declared Mrs McDougall's appointment illegal.


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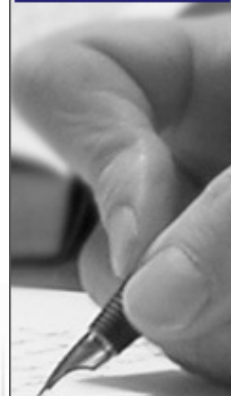


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