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Local & National

Secrecy test for first collusion inquiry

Tuesday, April 10, 2007

By Chris Thornton

Northern Ireland's first collusion inquiry could face an immediate secrecy test if MI5 and the Army pursue reported demands for the return of top secret files.

The two agencies - which ran informers in the heart of the IRA and loyalist groups - are said to be shredding documents handed back by the Stevens Inquiry.

And they are reportedly heaping pressure on the inquiry to hand back more documents before the Billy Wright inquiry begins next month.

Significant material related to those hearings has already gone missing - with the Prison Service admitting that hundreds of key documents relating to the LVF leader's murder have been lost or destroyed.

According to today's Guardian newspaper, sources in the Stevens Inquiry have said that the agencies are demanding the return of files compiled during the three investigations Lord Stevens has undertaken into collusion, stretching back almost 20 years.

If a stand-off develops, MI5 and the MoD could turn to Secretary of State Peter Hain to invoke secrecy clauses under the Inquiries Act.

Mr Hain has the power to restrict evidence from being made public by the inquiry.

Lord Stevens' detectives - who at one stage included PSNI Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde - uncovered some of the most significant evidence of collusion between members of the security forces and terrorists.






Their work uncovered the involvement of agents like Brian Nelson and IRA informer Stakeknife.

The Stevens' teams live investigations have been handed to the PSNI and the Historical Enquiries Team, but a Metropolitan Police unit continues to hold the thousands of documents and other evidence seized by the team.

That team is processing material for the upcoming collusion inquiries.

Although the most significant material in the Stevens' evidence relates to the proposed inquiry into the murder of Pat Finucane, some reportedly touches on the Wright case. Full hearings in that inquiry are due to begin at the end of next month.

The row comes at a key time for MI5. The agency is due to take over lead responsibility for anti-terrorist operations in Northern Ireland later this year.

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