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Local & National

MI5 shredded returned collusion probe files: now they want more

Wednesday, April 11, 2007

By Chris Thornton

New secrecy concerns hit Northern Ireland's first collusion inquiry last night after police sources confirmed MI5 and the Army shredded files returned by the Stevens Inquiry.

The two agencies - which ran informers in the IRA and loyalist groups - are demanding the return of more documents, sources said.

They are reportedly heaping pressure on the inquiry to hand back more secret files before the inquiry into the murder of loyalist Billy Wright begins next month.

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.

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.

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 thousands of documents and other evidence seized by the team.

That team is processing material for the forthcoming 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.

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

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