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Local & National

NIO probe QC set for Ulster to carry out questioning

Wednesday, March 14, 2007

By Chris Thornton

The QC investigating whether the NIO misled the High Court is coming to Northern Ireland to question potential witnesses.

Peter Scott QC is due to visit Belfast to conduct interviews about the handling of the Victims Commissioner's case, which touches on the conduct of Secretary of State Peter Hain and his two most senior civil servants.

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

According to Solicitor General Mike O'Brien, the review is still waiting for three potential witnesses to answer detailed questionnaires about the case and will take at least another two months to report.

Shadow Secretary of State David Lidington said he wants the inquiry to be thorough and complete but remains concerned about Mr Scott's final report being published.

Mr Scott's review was launched by the Attorney General in December, after a senior judge said the NIO had relied on "obviously misleading" information in defending Bertha McDougall's appointment.

Lord Justice Girvan made the call for an inquiry because he said evidence suggested there could have been an attempt to pervert the course of justice - saying that "for some reason it was decided within government that incorrect and misleading information would be supplied" to the court.

He was also scathing about the head of the civil service, Nigel Hamilton, saying he made a statement to the court that was "incomplete, misleading and evasive".

The Attorney General has said he intends to publish the report, but may not be able to because it could touch on personnel matters.

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