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Local & National

Why families want Bush backing for Semtex lawsuit

Monday, June 16, 2008

By Chris Thornton

Sexmtex nearly killed Emma Anthony. It did kill her father. Fred Anthony died because he was a cleaner in an RUC station and his entire family almost paid the same price in May, 1994, when an IRA bomb made with the deadly Czech explosive went off under their car.

Emma, aged three, was also expected to die. She spent a week in a coma, but made a recovery that doctors described as miraculous.

Fourteen years later, Emma Anthony is part of a major lawsuit designed to make the suppliers of the explosive pay for its brutal effects. Around 180 victims of the IRA are suing Libya in an American court, where it is possible to take lawsuits against state sponsors of terrorism.

But there are diplomatic ripples suggesting that avenue may not be open to them for long — and that's why the case is due to be raised with George Bush today.

Libya's intervention in the 1980s changed the face of the Troubles, by arming the IRA to such an extent that it was clear to British security chiefs that the Provos could continue a low-level campaign for a very long time.

Colonel Gadaffi, the Libyan leader, had helped arm the IRA in the seventies, but authorised new and major shipments after the US bombed his capital, Tripoli, in 1986 in response to a Berlin disco attack that killed two US servicemen. Because British bases were used for the bombings, Libya saw this as a way to strike back at the UK.

The shipments were exposed in 1987, when the Irish and French authorities intercepted the Eksund, a French vessel shipping more than 100 tonnes of weapons to the IRA.

But it was clear this wasn't the first consignment. The Libyans had already delivered hundreds of weapons, including assault rifles and rocket launchers, and — crucially — tonnes and tonnes of Semtex. There was enough of the powerful explosive to keep IRA bombers at work for years.

Now times have changed. Earlier this year, Libyan officials made proposals to the American administration for resolving similar legal aftershocks from terror campaigns. Detailed talks took place in London a couple of weeks ago.






Since the invasion of Iraq, relations between the US and Libya have eased after decades of sometimes violent hostility. Libya voluntarily gave up details of a planned nuclear programme, some diplomatic relations have been re-established, and the Libyans have hopes of entering a full economic relationship with the US.

The lawsuits — covering terrorist activity that occurred mainly in the 1980s and can be traced back to the Libyans — are an obstacle. Most prominent among them is the Lockerbie case, where the Libyans are already liable for over \$500 million in payments to victims of the bombing on Pan Am Flight 103.

The US wants them sorted before they will engage in full relations, such as a proposed visit to Libya by Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice before she leaves office with President Bush in January.

Both sides appear to want a settlement but victims are wary that will mean reduced payments for Libya.

Those involved in the Northern Ireland lawsuit further fear that a settlement will apply only to US citizens.


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There are a small number of US citizens involved in the lawsuit, which allowed the case to be filed in a US court, but the vast majority of the plaintiffs are from Northern Ireland. They want President Bush to stand up for them as well.

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