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Local & National

Billy Wright inquiry facing further delays

Friday, August 17, 2007

By Chris Thornton

The inquiry into Billy Wright's murder is facing further problems gathering evidence - forcing another delay that will push the inquiry's outcome further past the 10th anniversary of the LVF leader's death.

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When the collusion inquiry finished a month of background hearings in June, chairman Lord MacLean was confident they would return to Banbridge Court House in September.

"If we are not obstructed in our search for further documents or in the taking of statements - if, that is, we receive the degree of co-operation we have received from you all since we opened on 30th May - we should be ready to resume the leading of evidence again on 10th September," he told participants. "It hardly needs to be said that we are very keen to get on with this inquiry and I am sure that you all share that desire."

This week that optimism was dented, as the inquiry announced that it would not be able to resume again on September 10, because of familiar concerns about obtaining evidence, as well as other factors.

The inquiry, which has already cost more than £7m, is also facing a "significant" number of requests for anonymity and extra work from another legal challenge mounted against it over the summer.

Lord MacLean is to meet the other members of the inquiry panel next to assess how long the delay will be.

They may resume in the autumn, but the conclusion of hearings - already forecast to last well into 2008 - will be pushed back further.

The postponement was the latest hiccup in the long-running saga over evidence from the time of Wright's murder at the hands of INLA prisoners in the Maze.

The inquiry is investigating whether any state agencies allowed or supported Wright's murder in December 1997.

It has been hampered by difficulties in obtaining documents from every one of the security agencies involved in the case.

The Prison Service, PSNI and MI5 have been unable to find documents that they had or should have had in 1997, at the time of the murder.

In addition, the Prison Service has admitted destroying documents, including security files.

Missing evidence includes paperwork that was available at the time the inquiry was set up.

The inquiry also said this week that it has had difficulty obtaining witness statements. One of Wright's killers, John Kennaway, apparently took his own life in Maghaberry jail in June. The inquiry had not obtained a statement from him.

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