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Billy Wright murder documents 'missing'

By Chris Thornton

30 October 2006

Documents relating to the murder of Billy Wright have gone missing, the inquiry into the LVF chief's killing was expected to reveal today.

The inquiry starts a week of preliminary hearings in Belfast, concentrating on "document recovery" by the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

Those hearings take place almost a year after the inquiry issued a 28-day order for the production of documents.

The inquiry panel is also expected to rule on requests for anonymity by a number of witnesses, mainly prison officers.

Wright (37) was murdered by INLA members on December 27, 1997, inside the Maze Prison where he was serving a sentence for threatening to kill a woman.

The inquiry was set up to examine allegations of collusion. Both RUC Special Branch and MI5 knew of threats against Wright before he was killed, according to an official report into his death.

Full hearings into the LVF leader's death are not now due to begin until next autumn.

Problems with the production of documents have been a major factor in the delay. A year ago the inquiry ordered various agencies to comply, but in May this year it emerged that the PSNI - and possibly MI5 - had not complied with the orders.

In May, the NIO and the Prison Service said they had produced all required documents, but the inquiry was expected to reveal today that some Prison Service papers have gone missing.

"The Northern Ireland Prison Service has made strenuous efforts to recover all document requested by the Billy Wright Inquiry," a Prison Service spokesman said.

The disappearance of some material may be related to the closure of the Maze Prison, where the murder took place.

But if any of the material is sensitive, the disappearance may fuel loyalist claims that Wright's murder was the product of a security plot to end his opposition to the peace process.

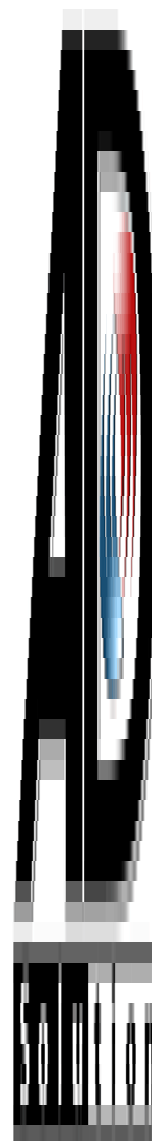
The start of the inquiry has also been delayed by a court case over the legal basis for the inquiry.

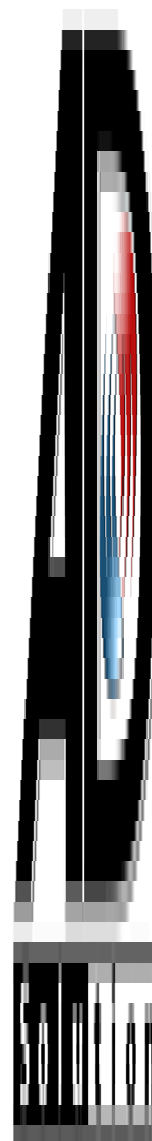
David Wright, the father of the murdered LVF leader, is challenging the decision to hold hearings under the Inquiries Act, recent legislation that gives the Secretary of State greater secrecy powers.

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