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Local & National

Unionists hit out as 'IRA volunteer' dispute engulfs new victims group

Thursday, January 31, 2008

By Chris Thornton

The First Ministers' Office moved yesterday to distance itself from a row about a new Victims Commissioner's description of her brother as an IRA member on "active service".

A spokesman for the office repeated yesterday that the statement issued by their media handlers had been put forward on behalf of the new Commissioners.

He said it was not an official statement by OFMDFM, although it had appeared on the First Ministers' website.

Sources said First Minister Ian Paisley was enraged by the confusion.

The row blew up when unionists complained about the description of Patricia MacBride's brother, Antoin. Her biography described him as "an IRA volunteer who was killed by the SAS whilst on active service in 1984".

UUP MLA David Burnside said the description was "totally unacceptable".

An Executive source said the biographies had been written by the Commissioners themselves and did not represent OFMDFM's position.

The statement was carried on the OFMDFM website but was removed when the News Letter newspaper questioned officials on Tuesday.

"The new Commissioners Designate for Victims and Survivors are independent of Government," a spokesman said.

"As they had just been appointed and had no machinery for delivering press releases, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister as a matter of courtesy merely facilitated the Commissioners in disseminating their own statement.






"The press release clearly states in capital letters: 'Statement issued by the commissioners designate for victims and survivors,' and includes a contact telephone number for their office.

"The content of the statement is entirely a matter for the Commissioners."

However, the email that carried the statement was headed OFMDFM Press Release.

The Belfast Telegraph yesterday quoted from the document and said Ms MacBride's brother had been "described by the First Ministers' office" as an IRA volunteer on active service.

The First Ministers' office said that description is incorrect.

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