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MI5 and MoD battle to keep Ulster secrets

Pressure on Stevens to return papers

Sandra Laville, crime correspondent

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MI5 and the Ministry of Defence are among government agencies demanding the return of secret documents from the Stevens inquiry in advance of four key inquiries which are set to expose the full extent of security force collusion with loyalist paramilitary figures in Northern Ireland, the Guardian has learned.

In some cases the organisations asking for the paperwork have successfully appealed for the return of the documents only to shred them, raising fears that vital evidence of collusion could disappear.

As a result, officers involved in the Stevens inquiry have begun making copies of all important secret documents to avoid crucial evidence being lost.

Sources within the inquiry, set up 18 years ago to investigate collusion by the security forces in Northern Ireland, say the pressure upon them to return confidential documents is growing as the May 30 date approaches for the opening of the full hearings with the inquiry into the murder of the loyalist terrorist Billy Wright. Stevens investigators will appear at the inquiry to present evidence of collusion in public for the first time.

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"There are calls from certain agencies for their documents to be returned," said a source. "In some cases we have handed them back and they have been shredded. The pressure on us is growing and it has got to the stage where we have told them what part of the word 'no' don't you understand?"

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"However, that doesn't stop people coming and saying we want the documents back and we want an assurance that you haven't got copies."

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In September oral hearings begin in the public inquiry into the murder of the solicitor Rosemary Nelson and the government is in the process of setting up an inquiry into the murder of another solicitor, Pat Finucane. The start of full hearings in the inquiry into the murder of Robert Hamill, a Catholic who was beaten to death by loyalists near an RUC Land Rover in Portadown, has been delayed in a wrangle over a request for anonymity from serving and former police officers.

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No legal action has been taken to force the inquiry team to return confidential material obtained over the course of members' investigations, but the use of the courts is a possibility for the agencies.

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It is known that MI5 and the Ministry of Defence are deeply concerned about the evidence the Stevens inquiry will come up with at the public hearings. They feel it is time to draw a line under the past.

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Almost 20 tonnes of documents collected by the Stevens inquiry teams are kept under tight security in Putney, south London. Contained in the paperwork is evidence of collusion, the withholding of intelligence and of agents being involved in murder, according to sources.

During three investigations by Lord Stevens and his officers 9,256 statements were taken, 10,391 documents totalling more than 1 million pages were recorded and 16,194 exhibits were seized.

"The first time this stuff will be really out in the public

domain will be at the Billy Wright inquiry," the source said. "This is why the cry from people for their documents to be handed back is getting stronger."

Lord Stevens arrived in Northern Ireland in 1989 to begin investigating allegations of collaboration between the security services and loyalist paramilitaries. He carried out three inquiries which highlighted collusion, a wilful failure to keep records, an absence of accountability, the withholding of intelligence and evidence and at the most extreme cases of agents being involved in murder. The first of three investigations led to 97 prosecutions.

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