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Omagh relatives may get just £2,500

BY Staff Reporter

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Relatives of Omagh bomb victims could receive just £2,500 each in compensation if they win their landmark civil action, the High Court heard yesterday.

The potential pay-outs were disclosed as a defence barrister claimed it would have been impossible for the families to sue five men over the atrocity without financial backing from the British government.

Mary Higgins QC, for Colm Murphy and Seamus Daly, also urged Mr Justice Morgan to adopt the highest standard of proof at the hearings in Belfast into the August 1998 Real IRA attack which killed 29 people, including a woman pregnant with twins.

Even though the relatives' lawyers have said they will be seeking the most punitive, exemplary damages as part of a multi-million pound claim, Ms Higgins argued that this was normally reserved for cases against the state.

She said the action against her clients and co-defendants Michael McKeivitt, Liam Campbell and Seamus McKenna was not about a desire for compensation.

"The primary motivation is to hold the people, or some of the people, they believe were involved in the Omagh bombing to account and to punish them in the most severe way for the rest of their lives," she said.

Setting out her case on Day 13 of the trial, Ms Higgins said British government funding of the families' legal bill now stood at around £1.6 million plus VAT.

"If those costs are not recovered from the defendants, who are all legally aided, then any damages that the plaintiff receive, whether from Real IRA funds – in America or otherwise – are going to be clawed back by the government," she said.

"So the maximum any plaintiff is going to receive is the sum of £2,500 in compensation."

The court also heard extracts from a series of press interviews with the families' London-based solicitor Jason McCue where he explained the reasoning behind taking the suspects to court.

Frustration with a lack of progress in the criminal investigation, a desire to 'name and shame' and showing victims' groups that they could bring the fight to paramilitaries were all cited in articles ranging from the Washington Times to the Tyrone Constitution.

In one piece read out in court, Mr McCue referred to seeking unprecedented damages and was quoted as saying: "Some would see that as divine punishment on earth."

Ms Higgins referring to statements of support given during the families' campaign.

"The government are effectively backers of this case because without this funding being given this case would not be here," she said.

Earlier, Michael O'Higgins SC, for McKeivitt, said the case was almost being used as an alternative to criminal proceedings where outrage at the bombing could be expressed.

Mr O'Higgins also continued to bid to block the introduction of FBI spy David Rupert's evidence to the trial in

Dublin where his client was convicted of directing terrorism.

Attacking the American truck-er-turned paramilitary infiltrator's character, the barrister questioned Mr Rupert's tax payments and alleged low morals when it came to making money.

The trial continues.

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