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Concern at length of time youth held

By Diana Rusk

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CONCERNS have been raised about the length of time police have held without charge a 17-year-old youth being questioned in connection with the murder of a police officer.

The teenager, who is regarded as a minor under law, was arrested nine days ago by detectives investigating the killing of Constable Stephen Carroll in Craigavon.

He and former Sinn Fein councillor Brendan McConville (37) were arrested the day after the murder and it is understood they have now been held for the longest time without charge since internment.

Detectives have been granted two extensions to question the pair and can hold them until next Tuesday before they will have to charge, release them or ask the courts for another extension.

Mike Ritchie, director of the Committee on the Administration of Justice, said he was concerned about the length of their detention period.

"We would be concerned about holding anyone for this length of time and the fact that one of them is a minor is an additional concern that aggravates the situation," he said.

He said that while there was no evidence that the teenager's human rights had been breached, there were concerns that such detentions would become the norm.

"It is during moments like now when there is universal revulsion that it is important the authorities keep to the elements of the Good

Friday Agreement that emphasise human rights.

"This is the precise time when we need to be most vigilant.

"Fortunately the current regime requires solicitors to be present during questioning but we will be monitoring the situation."

Children's Commissioner Patricia Lewsley last night declined to comment on the situation. A spokeswoman said she would not comment because policing and justice issues had not been devolved.

"It is a matter for the PSNI and criminal justice inspectorate to comment," she said.

"We don't comment on individual cases."

A spokeswoman for the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission was unable to comment as she was in the US.

In 2005 legal history was made when Northern Bank official Chris Ward became the suspect kept longest in custody without charge in Northern Ireland.

He was charged on his eighth day in detention over the £26.5 million bank robbery but acquitted during a

subsequent trial.

During the 1970s hundreds of people were detained without charge when internment without trial was introduced.

When that was abolished detectives were only allowed to hold suspects for 48 hours before charging or releasing them.

That was increased to seven days in 2000, rising to 14 days under the Criminal Justice Act 2003 and 28 days by the Terrorism Act 2006.

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