



undefined

## Sections

1. [The Irish Times](#)
2. [Breaking News](#)
3. [Sport](#)
4. [Business](#)
5. [Technology](#)
6. [Weather](#)
7. [In Focus](#)
8. [Blogs](#)
9. [Archive Search](#)
10. [Family Notices](#)

- [Editions](#)

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- [Jobs](#)
- [Homes](#)
- [Cars](#)

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- [Games](#)
- [Dating](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Frontpage Sales](#)
- [Photosales](#)
- [Ancestors](#)
- [Irish Times Training](#)
- [Mobile](#)
- [Reader Offers](#)



Monday, July 30, 2007

[Previous Day](#)

- [Home](#) |
- [Irish](#) |
- [World](#) |
- [Business](#) |
- [Sports](#)
- | [News Quiz](#)

[Next Day](#)

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## Omagh relatives shocked at setback

[Elaine Edwards](#)

Relatives of the victims of the 1998 Omagh bomb have said they are shocked at reports that gardaí may not give evidence in their civil court action against the alleged bombers.

Media reports yesterday said Garda Commissioner Noel Conroy had been advised by lawyers that the Garda investigation into the bombing might be compromised if gardaí were to give evidence in a civil case.

However, in a statement today, the Garda Commissioner said his position had "not changed" since he last met with the families of the Omagh bomb victims.

I'm sure there are procedures where the Garda don't need to disclose anything that would prejudice any further inquiries should someone be brought to justice for the Omagh bomb

Michael Gallagher

Twenty-nine people, including a woman pregnant with twins, died on August 15th, 1998, when the bomb ripped through the Co Tyrone town.

Electrician Sean Hoey from south Armagh is the only person who has been charged in connection with the bombing.

A judge is due to deliver his verdict later this year after studying the evidence presented during Hoey's trial in Belfast.

The Omagh Support and Self Help Group is taking its own civil action against a number of men it alleges were involved in the bombing.

It has so far spent nearly £2 million preparing its case and was hoping to have it heard next year. The action was due to begin in April but is on hold pending a decision on the fate of Mr Hoey.

Those named in the civil action include "Real IRA" chief Michael McKevitt, Colm Murphy, Seamus McKenna and Liam

Campbell, all from Co Louth, and Seamus Daly from Cullaville in Co Monaghan.

Michael Gallagher, chairman of the relatives' support group, today expressed surprise that relatives had learned of the possible setback to their case through yesterday's media reports.

"This came as a complete and utter shock. We were given no indication whatsoever that the Garda were unwilling to co-operate - in fact the opposite," Mr Gallagher told RTÉ's *News at One* .

"Our solicitors met with the Garda just a few weeks ago and had a very good meeting with them, and there was no indication at that time that they weren't prepared to come forward and support us."

Mr Gallagher added: "We weren't aware of any new leads, there was no imminent arrests or prosecutions so we're at a loss to see how the Garda co-operating with the civil action could in fact prejudice an ongoing criminal inquiry which of course we wouldn't want.

"Ideally what we need here is a criminal prosecution, and we're nine years on after the event, and either north or south that . . . hasn't happened yet.

"And if it comes to the point of giving evidence in court, I'm sure there are procedures where the Garda don't need to disclose anything that would prejudice any further inquiries should someone be brought to justice for the Omagh bomb," he said.

Mr Gallagher, whose son Aiden (21) was killed in the Omagh bomb, said the support group also felt there must be a better way of giving such news to families other than reading about it in a Sunday newspaper.

He said there had never been any indication that the Garda or the PSNI would not support the case.

"And I think that when a serious crime is committed, the first thing the PSNI and the Garda expect the public to do is to come forward and help them [by giving] all of the information they can. Here we are asking for the same help and support and the Garda are saying they are not willing to cooperate. I think it's totally unbelievable," he said.

I believe the Taoiseach must now, when it becomes clear that no other ways of arriving at the truth are available, do all within his power to have this inquiry put in place, as quickly, economically and effectively as possible

Liz McManus, Labour Party

Mr Gallagher said he believed the setback could "seriously damage" the civil case.

"We are going to have to review where we go from here if this...news story is correct. It's hard to believe that after £2 million we are going to have to sit down and look at what doors are open to us."

In a single-line statement, the Garda press office said: "The Garda Commissioner wishes to point out that the Garda Síochána position has not changed since he and other officers of An Garda Síochána met with relatives of the victims of the Omagh bombing and that no statement has been made to any media outlet."

Labour Party deputy leader Liz McManus said that renewed doubt about the willingness of the Garda to give evidence in the civilian action being taken by the Omagh bomb victims' families must come as a "devastating blow".

She said it "reinforces the case for alternative approach in the search for the truth surrounding this terrible atrocity".

She said the Taoiseach had repeated the Government's wish to provide the group with as much information as possible to assist their case.

"This January the Irish Human Rights Commission and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission jointly decided to recommend to the Irish and British Governments that a judge of international standing should be appointed to review all available material on the bombing and to decide whether it would be appropriate to institute a cross border public inquiry.

"I support that call and I believe the Taoiseach must now, when it becomes clear that no other ways of arriving at the truth are available, do all within his power to have this inquiry put in place, as quickly, economically and effectively as possible."

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