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Tuesday, January 13, 2009

Public hearings begin into 1997 Hamill murder

DAN KEENAN, Northern News Editor

THE ROBERT Hamill Inquiry will commence public hearings this morning as part of its investigation into the death of the Portadown Catholic in 1997 and the subsequent RUC handling of the case.

Mr Hamill (25), a father of two, was kicked to death in the Co Armagh town after a night out with friends. His partner gave birth to their daughter three months later. His attackers allegedly called out "Die you Fenian bastard" as they assaulted him.

The role of the Northern Ireland Director of Public Prosecutions in relation to the police investigation is also being examined.

The inquiry, which was called in 2004 and has been preparing for the public hearings stage since, will hear opening remarks from inquiry chairman Sir Edwin Jowitt, a former justice of the High Court.

There will also be opportunities for remarks from the leading counsel to the inquiry, Ashley Underwood QC, from Barra McGrory QC representing the Hamill family, and from Margaret Ann Dinsmore QC, who appears for key witness Robert Atkinson, a former RUC reserve constable.

The PSNI is to be represented by Richard Ferguson QC.

The inquiry, which is to be held under the controversial Inquiries Act, will call about 160 witnesses, some of whom will appear anonymously.

It is anticipated that the final report will be submitted to the British government by June next year.

Other members of the panel are the Rev Baroness (Kathleen) Richardson of Calow, who is moderator of the Churches' Commission for Inter Faith Relations, and Sir John Evans, former chief constable of Devon and Cornwall constabulary.

Human rights watchdog the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) said it will be monitoring the hearings and other inquiries recommended by retired Canadian supreme court judge Peter Cory, who carried out a series of preliminary investigations into disputed

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killings.

Sinn Féin welcomed the commencement of the public hearings but criticised the legislation under which they are to be conducted.

Upper Bann Assembly member John O'Dowd said yesterday: "Even now with the inquiry starting, an important line of inquiry into the state's handling of the murder investigation and prosecutions has been closed down by the British government with the refusal of the British secretary of state Shaun Woodward to extend the remit of the inquiry to allow examination of the DPP and their handling of the initial reports into the killing of Robert Hamill."

Referring to the projected £36 million (€39.99 million) cost of the inquiry, he added: "Those who rush to the media to complain about the costs of such inquiries should direct their attention to those who covered up the circumstances of such killings and who still place obstacles in the way of such inquires."



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