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Friday, August 15, 2008

## Families' unease overshadows this poignant tribute

The first of Omagh's commemorations is held today with less than a total sense of unity, writes **Dan Keenan**

SOME RELATIVES of those who died in the Real IRA attack will gather today in Omagh's memorial garden and at the bomb site itself, joined by political representatives from Spain, Stormont, London and Dublin, including the Taoiseach.

Others will stay at home as they have done on previous anniversaries, preferring to mark the sombre occasion privately.

Many are deliberately staying away from today's high profile ceremonies, unhappy with the manner of Omagh council's organisation of the event and some being displeased at the presence of certain, unnamed Northern political representatives.

According to Omagh council, today's ceremony "is planned to be a reflective and uplifting ceremony which will include scripture and inspirational readings, and a short address by former hostage and church envoy Terry Waite".

The service will be conducted in English, Irish and Spanish and will include a minute's silence at 3.10pm, the exact moment the dissident republican bomb exploded in the town centre 10 years ago killing 29 men, women and children and unborn twins and injuring hundreds more. A newly-installed memorial will also be unveiled. The Garden of Light memorial will be officially opened, and so-called "heliostats" switched on. This glass monument at the bomb site will reflect sunlight to the memorial garden and onto 31 glass structures representing the 31 lives lost.

Council representatives, aware of the misgivings of many victims' families, accept the proceedings this afternoon will begin without that sense of unity which had been sought. Nonetheless, the council has aimed high. "The Commemorative Ceremony is aimed at giving the community collectively the opportunity to reflect on the events of August 15th, 1998, to allow us to remember those who lost their lives, those who were injured and those who continue to suffer," it said in a statement yesterday. "Furthermore, the event will recognise the tremendous steps which have been made by individuals and by the community as a whole in rebuilding lives and our town." Ambitious and hopeful words. But recent happenings have conspired to dent the sense of optimism.

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Despite the marking of the 10th anniversary, today's commemoration is made all the more poignant by the tangible sense of matters left wholly unresolved and of justice demonstrably not done.

PSNI chief constable Sir Hugh Orde has already admitted publicly that the chances of jailing anyone in connection with the bombing are bleak in the absence of a dramatic change of heart by someone close to the bombers. "Unless we get a substantial new lead or perhaps a new witness stepping forward, or someone confesses to the crime, it is highly unlikely that you'll see the investigation reaching a successful conclusion in the sense of a criminal prosecution that leads to a conviction," he told the BBC yesterday.

Were it the case that those responsible had been convicted, today's gathering and the second ceremony organised by the bulk of the victims' families and scheduled for Sunday would take on a different character. But such has been the series of failures by state agencies on both sides of the Border to put the guilty behind bars and to close the case that many relatives cannot move on.

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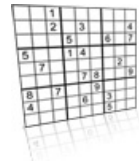
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