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Tuesday, March 17, 2009

Committee told of Omagh 'catalogue of failings'

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DAN KEENAN

BRITISH INTELLIGENCE service officers have not done all they can to ensure the Real IRA bombers who attacked Omagh in 1998 are jailed, a committee of MPs has heard.

Michael Gallagher, father of Aiden Gallagher who was one of the 29 murdered in August of that year, told the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee he believed intelligence about the attack had not been shared as effectively as it should.

The committee, sitting in the former Stormont senate chamber yesterday, heard Mr Gallagher say he was at a loss as to why the guilty people had not been tracked down and brought before the courts.

He contrasted this unfavourably with the efforts mounted against the suicide bombers who attacked London in 2005.

“With the Omagh intelligence there’s so many discrepancies here that we are at a loss as to why these bombers and the people associated with them were not put in jail. They could have passed at the earliest possible stage to the senior investigating officer.”

Mr Gallagher, a spokesman for many of the Omagh families, added: “It took the RUC almost nine months trawling through millions of telephone billing records in order to achieve the telephone numbers that literally – if the intelligence services had co-operated – policemen, let it be RUC or Garda, could have put their hand on the shoulder of the people on that very evening.”

Such a “catalogue of failings” meant the bereaved of Omagh wanted closure on what was the most serious single terrorist incident during the Troubles.

Repeating a call for a judicial, cross-Border inquiry, Mr Gallagher said: “The only way that can be done is engaging a judicial framework.”

John Ware, a BBC Panorama journalist who has reported on the intelligence operation, is due to face questions from the committee next week.

Inquiries made by him showed that the British intelligence staff at the government's communications centre in Cheltenham had monitored mobile phone activity on the day of the bombing of Omagh.

A recent inquiry by intelligence commissioner Sir Peter Gibson did not point the finger at any security agency in the Omagh case, even though those investigating the murders were not told of the mobile phone intelligence or the fact that some phone numbers of those involved were known.

Earlier, the committee discussed the planned Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, hearing from Amnesty International that the recent murders highlighted the need for such a measure.

Recommendations on the scope of a Bill have been forwarded to the British government, which still holds justice powers.

Some unionists, however, are opposed to the notion of a Bill of Rights specific to Northern Ireland but not the rest of the UK, and also to some ideas in the recommendations drawn up by a majority of a specially-convened group.

Nationalists and human rights groups are particularly keen for as wide-ranging a Bill as possible.

Spokesman for Amnesty International's Belfast office Patrick Corrigan told the MPs the violence of last week underlined the need for a Bill and the requirement for society to develop its human rights structures in the wake of the conflict.

Referring to the chorus of calls insisting there must be no return to the days of violence, Mr Corrigan said: "The Bill of Rights is part of that shared vision of society as equality and progress for the whole community."

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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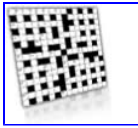
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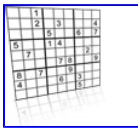
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