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Friday, October 24, 2008

Sinn Féin parade protest gets approval

GERRY MORIARTY, Northern Editor

SINN FÉIN was last night given the go-ahead by the Parades Commission to stage a protest against a welcome home parade for British soldiers from Northern Ireland who have returned from duty in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Police will now have to provide sufficient security to try to ensure the welcome home parade, the Sinn Féin protest, and an additional unauthorised protest planned by dissident republicans pass off peacefully.

The British army parade and the Sinn Féin protest will be in sight of each other in central Belfast on Sunday week. The commission hopes a "sterile zone" of 40 metres separating the protest from the parade at Belfast City Hall will help to prevent trouble.

The British army has brought forward its parade from 12.45pm on Sunday week to 11.45am, ostensibly to avoid disrupting city centre business, although the hour-earlier start is viewed as an attempt to increase the chances of the day being relatively peaceful. The Sinn Féin protest will take place around the same time.

Moreover, the Éirígí republican group, which opposes the Stormont powersharing administration, has organised a parade and protest congregating at Divis Tower on the Falls Road at 11.30am. Éirígí has not applied to the commission for permission for its parade and it will be a matter for the police how to deal with it.

Sinn Féin is to launch a poster and billboard campaign today against the army "homecoming". West Belfast Sinn Féin Assembly member Paul Maskey has pledged the Sinn Féin protest will be "dignified and peaceful".

Unionists have called for the Sinn Féin protest to be banned, warning it could damage community relations and also create political difficulties.

The Parades Commission said its decision was dictated "by a desire to accommodate both the parade and a legitimate protest in a way

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which ensures that peace is maintained on the streets".

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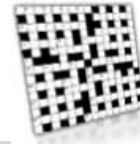
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