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Wednesday, March 25, 2009

Judges rule today on bid to stop detention

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GERRY MORIARTY Northern Editor

JUDGES WILL rule today on a challenge to police being given more time to hold six people over the terrorist murders of two soldiers and a police officer in the North.

Those arrested, who include prominent republican Colin Duffy, are contesting the granting of a seven-day extension to their detention period while forensic test results are awaited. They claim the extra period is unlawful, and that the County Court judge who oversaw it failed to give reasons why it was considered necessary.

But after they won the right to seek a judicial review, counsel for the Police Service of Northern Ireland stressed that detectives were working flat out.

Paul Maguire QC told the High Court "police were working overtime, as were laboratories to try to deal with these matters." Four of those in custody, including Duffy, have been questioned about the Real IRA shootings of sappers Mark Quinsey (23) and Patrick Ayinkar (21) outside Massereene Army barracks in Antrim on March 7th.

The other two were arrested in connection with the murder of Constable Stephen Carroll (48) by the Continuity IRA in Craigavon, Co Armagh, two days later. None has been charged, but at the weekend an extension was granted under the 2006 Terrorism Act, which allows police to hold suspects for up to 28 days before they must be formally accused or released.

Meanwhile, Prof Monica McWilliams, head of the North's Human Rights Commission, has come under criticism from unionists – including a member of the commission – for questioning the length of time and the conditions under which the suspects were being held.

Prof McWilliams, who yesterday visited the Antrim centre where the suspects were being held, issued a statement on Monday evening explaining her reasons for the planned visit.

These comments prompted the DUP European candidate Diane Dodds to accuse Prof McWilliams of "headline hunting". She said Prof McWilliams did not have the support of all her fellow commissioners and that the visit was inappropriate. Ulster Unionist MLA and Policing Board member Basil McCrea also condemned Prof McWilliams "for failing to recognise the robust human rights standards that apply to the PSNI".

After visiting the detention centre yesterday, Prof McWilliams said: "I remind those concerned that the commission is charged to independently ensure human rights standards are adhered to and maintained, not to reflect populist sentiment." Later yesterday, DUP member of the 10-member commission Jonathan Bell said: "I see little evidence that human rights are advanced using the medium of a media circus."

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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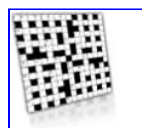
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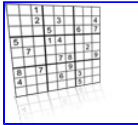
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