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Hamill death inquiry faces fresh delay

The delayed public inquiry into the death of Robert Hamill, who was kicked to death in Portadown in 1997, faces a new delay, it emerged today.

Full hearings which were due to begin next month have been put on hold because Secretary of State Shaun Woodward is still considering a request by the Hamill family to widen the inquiry's terms of reference.

Even though the first of the oral evidence has yet to start, the inquiry has already cost £13 million. The opening hearing was almost three years ago.



Robert Hamill was kicked to death in Portadown 11 years ago

Father-of-two Hamill (25) a Catholic, died in April 1997 after a vicious attack by loyalists in the centre of Portadown.

Police officers sitting in a nearby Land Rover were later accused of failing to intervene. In January 2007 Mr Hamill's family asked the then Secretary of State Peter Hain to extend the inquiry's terms of reference to include the Director of Public Prosecutions.

This would allow the inquiry to decide whether the DPP was at fault in respect of any failure to prosecute individuals following the death.

One man charged with the murder was later acquitted by a court. Towards the end of last year, the inquiry which is being headed up by Sir Edwin Jowitt, a retired High Court judge, believed a decision on the Hamill family application by the Secretary of State was imminent.

It is understood that 230 statements have been made, including those of eye witnesses, civilians as well as retired and serving police officers who were working for the RUC at the time.

A provisional date was then set for the oral hearings to begin on April 8th, but it emerged today that it will be another fortnight before Mr Woodward announces his decision. If he agrees, the DPP will need time to prepare and if he refuses, then the Hamill family is likely to mount a legal challenge.

A spokesperson for the inquiry said today: "The inquiry is naturally disappointed. The delay is likely to increase the cost of the inquiry. However by taking the decision at this stage to vacate the start date, the inquiry hopes to minimise any such increase.

"Until the decision is announced, the inquiry is not in a position to set a new start date. It will announce one as soon as possible." A spokesman for the Northern Ireland Office said: "We have informed the

inquiry and the Hamill family solicitors that we will be writing to them within two weeks on a decision on the terms of reference."

PA

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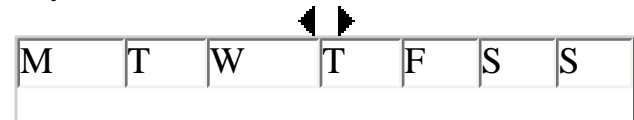
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