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Victims' families need closure - Ahern

Closure must be given to families of victims killed in collusion-linked bombings and shootings before the General Election expected in May or June, the Government said tonight.

Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and Foreign Affairs Minister Dermot Ahern both met in Dublin with seven groups affected by 1970s atrocities north and south of the Border.

The relatives are calling for public inquiries and believe their cases have been strengthened by last month's report by Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan which revealed collusion between the RUC and loyalist gunmen in several killings.

Mr Ahern said after today's 90-minute meeting: "The Taoiseach indicated that he would like to deal with this before the General Election."

It also emerged today that Sinn Fein is holding its first meeting next week with PSNI Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde since it made the historic decision to back policing.

The party is also holding a collusion conference in Dublin on Saturday. Among those meeting the Taoiseach were relatives of members of the Miami Showband, the 1975 Dundalk and Silverbridge bomb and gun attacks, the Reavey and O'Dowd families who each lost three family members in early 1976, and relatives of the victims of bomb attacks in Castleblayney and Keady in 1976.

The daughter of a man killed in the 1975 bombing of Dundalk pub, Kay's Tavern, revealed that the incident still causes her nightmares. Margaret English, daughter of Hugh Watters, said she believes the case of her family has been strengthened by the revelations in the Police Ombudsman's recent report.

"It is shocking that the British government sent out agents to kill my dad. I find that unbelievable," she said. Mrs English also claimed that her family was badly treated by the Garda and the state over the incident, but added that the Taoiseach apologised for this today.

She agreed that there should be a compensation scheme set up for victims of collusion. "I still have nightmares. I remember running around the streets looking for my dad. There is a very human aspect. "At the time I was bitter but my mother said to me if I was bitter I would kill myself from the inside so I just shut everything out."

Mr Ahern said that the Government was waiting for a report by barrister Patrick MacEntee on the Dublin and Monaghan bombings — due on Tuesday.

Mr Ahern said: "He may ask for another extension, we hope not but obviously that is a matter for him. If we get that report in February, we will have to have a debate in the Oireachtas and then decide what to do. "About 3,000 people were killed in the Troubles and each of those families have stories to tell.

"We are pushing the British very strongly on the need to give comfort to these families in some way, it may not satisfy everyone, but to draw a line under these cases once and for all. "All of these cases are going to dog the peace process and (British-Irish) relations forever if we don't deal with them one way or another.

"There is a willingness to cooperate as much as possible. If you look at the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, it has gone on for nearly nine years and had half a billion pounds sterling spent on it." He said the victims' families would be consulted before any action was taken.

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