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Last Updated: Friday, January 23, 2009, 18:01

Plan to compensate Troubles victims condemned

A plan to give £12,000 to the family of each person killed in the Northern Ireland Troubles - including dead paramilitaries - was condemned by unionist politicians tonight.

The proposal, costing £40 million, is one of a raft of measures an advisory group believes could help deal with the legacy of violence.

Their ambitious blueprint - set to cost a total of £210 million - includes plans for a "legacy commission" to bring closure to all the unsolved murders of the Troubles in a five year period.

But tonight unionist politicians reacted angrily to the proposal for a one-off payment for relatives of the more than 3,000 victims, regardless of the role their loved one played in the Troubles.

It is understood the Consultative Group on the Past led by former Church of Ireland Primate Lord Robin Eames and former Northern Ireland police board vice chair Denis Bradley wanted to end the so-called "hierarchy of victims", in the belief that the pain of all those bereaved is equal.

Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader Peter Robinson said: "I think people in Northern Ireland who have gone through decades of violence will be very hurt indeed at any proposal which allows people who have been engaged in the most heinous acts in society being put on a level playing field with those who have been victims of those horrendous events."

He said any plan to deal with the past must have the needs of innocent victims and the maintenance of justice at its core.

He added: "However, the reported proposals do not represent an approach which would be in any way acceptable to the Democratic Unionist Party and the people we represent."

The payment scheme is based on a funding programme already introduced in the Republic of Ireland where victims received 15,000 euro, which at the time the new proposal was drafted equated to approximately £12,000.

It is understood the Eames/Bradley plan would include all those who died as a result of the Northern Ireland conflict, whether they were killed in Ireland, Britain or overseas.

The Eames/Bradley group tonight declined to comment on their report and asked for the public to wait until the full set of proposals were released on Wednesday before drawing conclusions.

But the controversial one-off payment scheme would mean that the family of the IRA Shankill bomber Thomas Begley, who died planting the bomb that killed nine people in

1993, will receive the same payment as his victims' loved ones.

Similarly next of kin of the leader of notorious loyalist killers the Shankill Butchers, Lenny Murphy, who tortured and killed Catholics before he was shot dead by the IRA, will also be eligible, as will be the families he bereaved.

Alex Attwood of the nationalist SDLP said people should not rush to judgment, but wait for the full report and decide if its overall content represented an ethical way forward.

Ulster Unionist MEP Jim Nicholson warned the government against implementing a proposal he condemned as immoral.

"The proposal endorses the morally flawed notion that a terrorist killed while undertaking a mission of murder has the same status as an innocent civilian murdered in a bomb attack or a member of the security forces murdered in front of their family," he said.

"People across our entire community will find this suggestion repugnant."

Leader of the hard-line Traditional Unionist Voice Jim Allister said: "This definition puts the terrorist injured by his own bomb on a par with the innocent victims of Enniskillen, Claudy and La Mon."

The authors of the plan are understood to have sought to treat the bereaved equally, without making judgements on how or why their loved ones died, but the government will make a final decision on the proposals.

The wide-ranging plans could cost £300 million, although nearly a third of the sum could be covered by savings made when special police units currently examining the past are stood down.

The Irish government would play a key role and contribute substantially to the cost of programmes expected to operate on a cross border basis.

The Eames/Bradley group is understood to have proposed a legacy Commission chaired by an international figure to investigate unsolved murders.

But in cases where families are prepared to waive the chance of convictions, it would seek to recover information on the murder from security forces and paramilitaries.

There would be no public hearings under proposal, unlike the South African Truth Commission model.

An estimated £100 million would be saved as the proposed legacy commission would replace the responsibility for historic cases currently shared by the Police Ombudsman and the police Historic Inquiries Team (HET).

There will be a call for existing public inquiries into the past to be concluded, but no further costly inquiries should be initiated.

Issues in wider society would be tackled to meet the needs of victims, a Reconciliation Forum would help heal divisions, while sectarianism and social problems would be tackled.

PA

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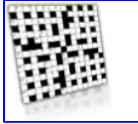
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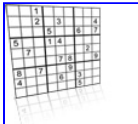
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