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Angry clashes delay Troubles report publication

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Victims of the Northern Ireland Troubles were involved in angry clashes in Belfast today before the publication of a new report on dealing with three decades of violence.

Bereaved relatives stood head-to-head pointing fingers at one another, trading accusations over the deaths of their loved ones.

The heated exchanges took place within feet of Northern Ireland chief constable Sir Hugh Orde, who was among dignitaries and hundreds of relatives gathered for the launch of the report in the city's Europa Hotel.

There were appeals for calm after protesters, including hard-line Unionist MEP Jim Allister, held placards condemning the authors of the report on dealing with the Troubles for recommending a £12,000 payment to the families of all victims, including dead paramilitaries.

There were appeals for calm before the arrival of the document's authors, Lord Eames and Dennis Bradley.

Also in the audience was former Metropolitan chief John Stevens, who led inquiries into the allegations of collusion between security forces and loyalist paramilitaries.

Relatives whose loved ones were killed by republicans shouted accusations as the families of Catholics shot dead by security forces retaliated with stories of their own loss.

At one stage the situation in the Europa Hotel threatened to turn really ugly as people clashed with each other, jabbing fingers and trading insults.

Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams, who was sitting in the hall, was among those targeted by the protesters. He sat impassively as protesters stood within feet of him hurling allegations and insults.

One screamed: "This is the man who was in charge of the IRA on the day of Bloody Friday."

Former member of the Northern Ireland Assembly Cedric Wilson was one of the most vocal of the demonstrators and sat down only after being threatened with arrest.

Mr Allister, leader of hard-line unionist party the Traditional Unionist Voice, and well-known victims' campaigner Willie Frazer were also among a group of people who interrupted the start of proceedings by holding aloft placards denouncing the group's proposals.

Relatives of Catholic and Protestant victims directed abuse at each other across the packed grand ballroom of the hotel before calm was finally restored.

The start of the event was delayed by around 15 minutes amid efforts to restore order.

The event eventually got under way with an introduction from South African mediator Brian Currin, who was involved in the truce recovery process in that country and advised the consultative group during their work.

"The peace process, as we well know, has a long, long journey to go," he said, admitting that dealing with the legacy of the past would be one of the most difficult issues to overcome before Northern Ireland could secure a shared future.

One of the protesters was the brother of an RUC officer shot dead with two colleagues by the IRA in June 1977.

Hazlett Lynch, from Magherafelt, Co Derry, who heads a victims' support group, said he was disgusted by the report.

Holding up a photograph of his younger brother Kenneth, 22, he said: "It is another cynical attempt to rewrite history.

"This report dovetails with the Government's policy in Northern Ireland.

"It's a disgrace."

Organisers of the press launch threatened to have some of the protesters removed before proceedings eventually got under way.

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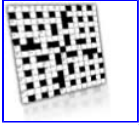
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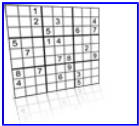
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