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Troubles reconciliation plan calls for peace pledge



Members of the Consultative Group: (from top left, anti-clockwise) Willie John McBride, Rev Lesley Carroll, Elaine Moore, Lord Robin Eames, Denis Bradley, Jarlath Burns, James Mackey, David Porter.
Photo: Consultative Group on the Past/PA Wire

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Groups involved in the Northern Ireland Troubles could apologise for their role and pledge never to use violence again as part of an ambitious five-year reconciliation plan unveiled today.

More than a decade after the Belfast Agreement charted a political path out of violence, an independent body has produced a blueprint to heal a society still divided after decades of conflict.

The £300 million plan aims to investigate thousands of murders, search for the truth behind controversial episodes, tackle sectarianism and put agreed remembrance ceremonies in place after five years.

The most controversial recommendation, however, is that the families of all victims, including dead paramilitaries, receive a £12,000 payment as a recognition of their loss.

The Consultative Group on the Past, led by former Church of Ireland Primate Lord Robin Eames and former vice chair of the Northern Ireland Policing Board Denis Bradley, published its proposals in Belfast today at a ceremony attended by hundreds of people affected by the Troubles.

The group's 190-page report, compiled after 18 months of consultation, made more than 30 recommendations which will now go to the British Government for consideration.

"In Northern Ireland we are dealing with communities that have been in conflict for a long time, each as likely as the other to be in denial of the wrong that has been done in its name and of the goodness of the other," the report said.

"One of the goals should be to enable these communities to face the past together in a way that enables each to admit a substantial share in the accumulated and generic guilt of all the hostility ridden years."

The report's authors, who had access to sensitive security material, raised concerns over collusion between security forces and loyalist groups and revealed that the number of agents recruited by the intelligence services was much higher than ever suspected.

"The lives of those lost cannot be restored," the report noted.

"The dignity and courage of many victims and survivors is a testimony to their strength and an invitation to all in society to do everything in our power to stop our differences and prejudices spiralling downwards into the kind of violence that we have known in the past.

"It is in all our hands to make sure we, as a society, do not create a new generation of victims."

Police Ombudsman Al Hutchinson welcomed the proposals contained in the report on the basis that his organisation will still investigate complaints against police, but be released from probing its current tally of 120 cases from the past.

He said: "The recommendations are challenging and would seem to offer a very reasoned attempt to start a process that can deal with the many issues arising from Northern Ireland's past."

British prime minister Gordon Brown's spokesman said the report's recommendations would be considered "with great care".

Asked if Mr Brown backed the payment proposals, he said: "We have just received this report.

"We will study the report, consider its findings, and reply in due course."

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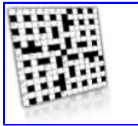
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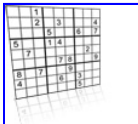
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