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Last Updated: 30/04/2008 15:52

## Tyrone murder was sectarian - inquest

A Catholic man stabbed 12 years ago in Northern Ireland was the victim of a sectarian killing, an inquest heard today.

However a PSNI detective inspector said there was no evidence to substantiate claims that he may have been the first victim of the Loyalist Volunteer Force.

Niall Donovan (28) was found stabbed to death near Dungannon, Co. Tyrone in June 1996.

The bank official, from Greystone Park, Belfast was discovered by a taxi driver with deep stab wounds in his stomach.

Mr Donovan died after haemorrhaging in South Tyrone Hospital 14 hours later, after undergoing an emergency blood transfusion.

Detective Inspector Ian McDonald told the inquest in Belfast that although the case had been referred to the Historical Enquiries Team, which is probing over 3,200 unsolved murders during the Troubles, no new evidence had been uncovered and no one made accountable for the murder.

Mr McDonald said: "There has been speculation that this was the first murder by the LVF but there is no evidence, but there may have been a sectarian nature to it.

"The LVF was established some time in 1996 around the time of this murder, but it hasn't been proved."

He added: "People with loyalist paramilitary links were arrested but were later released."

The LVF was formed after the Ulster Volunteer Force stood down its Mid Ulster unit headed by Billy Wright in the wake of the shooting dead of Catholic taxi driver Michael McGoldrick at the height of the Drumcree crisis in July 1996.

Coroner John Leckey asked Mr McDonald today if he thought the motive for Mr Donovan's murder was sectarian.

The Detective Inspector replied: "My personal opinion is yes, it was sectarian."

The inquest was told police had recovered 21 knives on the route that Mr Donovan took that night, however none were identified as those used to stab him.

The family of Mr Donovan said during the hearing it was a disgrace it had taken 12 years to hold an inquest.

Mr Donovan's father Dermot asked the coroner: "Why has it taken 12 years to come to this point?"

Mr Leckey explained all the coroners offices in Northern Ireland had been merged and many files had been passed to his office.

"I'm terribly sorry the inquest has not been held earlier," he said.

"Another reason is that investigators from the RUC, the police as they were known then, have all retired.

"This is not be an isolated case and there are other inquests that have been held back which are even older. I am sorry about the delay of this inquest. I know the reopening of this must be be hard for you."

Dermot Donovan begged the authorities to keep trying hard to find the killers of his son.

He said: "After 12 years, there was an error of judgment in not holding this inquest earlier."

Niall Donovan was discovered face down by taxi driver Dominic Donaghy who was taking two people home when he came across the victim's body on the Manse Road in Dungannon.

Mr Donaghy said: "I noticed blood on his shirt and you could see guts out of his stomach. He was moving and breathing but he would suddenly stop breathing like he had passed out. I radioed for an ambulance."

Pathologist Dr Jack Crane said Mr Donovan suffered considerable internal bleeding from his wounds.

Dr Crane said: "The weapon was deeply thrust and the tip of the blade went through the back of the spine which indicates great force. The blade must be at least five to six inches before the spine can be injured."

He added that the weapon could have been an ordinary kitchen knife with a broad blade.

Dr Crane said that Mr Donovan had been healthy with a good muscular build and would have still been conscious and capable of movement after the stabbing.

After the inquest, the victim's mother, Carolee Donovan, said: "I can't tell you how I feel, it is indescribable, the worst day of my life.

"When you have children yourself, you can begin to realise what it must feel like to lose one.

"I agree with what my husband has said, it is unacceptable that it has taken 12 years to have an inquest.

"The long time it has taken has affected my other children. Niall was the eldest of three and it has been devastating for everyone. After this stage, you would hope we could move on and get on with our lives."

**PA**

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