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Families blame Sinn Fein for bomb memorial delay

By David Sharrock, Ireland Correspondent

Relatives of the 29 people who died in the Omagh bombing have accused Sinn Fein of blocking a memorial at the site of the explosion.

The families of the victims, who included a woman who was eight months pregnant with twins, reacted furiously to the reopening of the street in which the bomb exploded in August 1998.

The town council, which is dominated by Sinn Fein, had promised that a memorial to the victims would be unveiled when the street reopened after a £1.7 million refurbishment.

Michael Gallagher, whose teenage son Aiden was killed in the explosion, said that urgent action was needed to have the memorial put in place. Mr Gallagher said he had no doubt that the memorial had not been installed at the site of the explosion — the worst single terrorist atrocity of the Troubles — because Sinn Fein had objected to the wording.

The proposed wording, which had been agreed by the families, was to read: “To honour and remember 31 people murdered and hundreds injured from three nations by a dissident republican terrorist car bomb.”

Among the victims were two Spaniards and a child from the Irish Republic. The 31 people referred to in the wording include the 29

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people who died in the explosion on August 15, 1998, and the unborn twins.

Barry McElduff, a Sinn Fein councillor and Northern Ireland Assembly member, denied the families' claim, adding that he had not seen the proposed words before yesterday.

Earlier, however, his party colleague Sean Clarke had said: "Omagh council has unanimously agreed to unveil a memorial stone in 2008 to mark the tenth anniversary of the tragedy, and the council has also unanimously agreed the wording of the inscription."

Mr Gallagher said that this proved the truth of the allegations. "They can't even get their story straight. It's unbelievable that Sinn Fein have done this to us," he said.

Mr Gallagher said that planning the memorial had taken years but that problems had arisen only at the final stages, when the victims presented the words to a working group involving Omagh District Council.

He said: "They thanked us and then at the next meeting said, 'it's better to broaden this out for consultation and better to have widespread public support'. The real reason is because the council is not willing to accept wording on the stone that states the facts of what happened.

He said that the families had been sickened by the problems. "There are many people who have erected monuments, in some cases illegally, across Northern Ireland but we have stuck to the legal route and are being thwarted simply because we want what happened here not to be forgotten and to be remembered truthfully."

Sir Reg Empey, the Ulster Unionist Party leader, who has met the families, said that all they wanted was a simple plaque where the blast occurred. "Nobody is actually suggesting that the Provisional republican movement did it. The victims' group isn't suggesting that," he said.

"But the fact is there's resistance to the wording and it's merely prolonging their agony and not helping their healing. They should be entitled to have a simple memorial."

Omagh council said that the working group believed "it was essential

to create a memorial which would be valued and respected by the whole community". It added: "This process has been a long-term project which has been sensitive to the healing process within the community." David Hanson, the Northern Ireland Minister who took part in the reopening of the street, said before a meeting with the families that he was genuinely sorry the dispute had developed.

Sean Hoey, from South Armagh, is on trial at Belfast Crown Court for the murder of the 29 people who died.

Hain criticised over Ulster appointment

Peter Hain, the Northern Ireland Secretary, was criticised yesterday by a High Court judge for having an "improper political purpose" in appointing the commissioner for victims of the Troubles.

Mr Justice Girvan called for a public inquiry into the appointment of Bertha McDougall, the widow of a police reservist murdered by republican terrorists.

The judge upheld an application for judicial review by Brenda Downes, the widow of a man killed by a Royal Ulster Constabulary plastic bullet, to challenge the appointment of Mrs McDougall, whose candidacy was supported by the Reverend Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party.

Mr Justice Girvan referred to "evasive and misleading" information in correspondence that led Mr Hain to contend there was no evidence to justify the challenge by Mrs Downes.

An affidavit by Jonathan Phillips, permanent secretary at the Northern Ireland Office, stated that Mr Hain had taken into account that Mrs McDougall had been suggested by the DUP and that her appointment would build the party's confidence in the political process.

The judge said that civil servants gave the misleading impression that Mrs McDougall's name was put forward by senior officials and that no consultation took place with the DUP. "The reality is that the Secretary of State did consult the DUP," he said. "[He] did in fact invite them twice to informally propose a particular individual whom he would consider."

Mrs Downes said: "Right has overcome might."

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