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Politics

Victims group can start work after all

Saturday, February 23, 2008

By Victor Gordon

The Stormont Executive is at an advanced stage in bringing forward legislation to enable the four new Victims Commissioners to do their work, officials insisted last night.

The Executive was responding to criticism that the four people appointed last month to champion the rights of people who lost relatives during the Troubles were unable to act on behalf of victims because the body had not yet been created in legislation.

One of the four commissioners - broadcaster Mike Nesbitt - claimed that legal loopholes were holding him back from doing the job.

He stated that the current legislation allowed for just one commissioner, and not a commission.

He claimed that the current set-up meant the four commissioners had no legal standing, and were frustrated in areas like data protection and freedom of information, and the commissioners could be held liable.

Yesterday he said: "I do not have legal status, I don't have insurance and I don't have legal backing."

Later in the day, a spokesperson for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) said that draft legislation was being prepared to meet the new situation and would be ready by late spring.

And the spokesperson insisted there was no barrier for the commissioners to engage with victims and survivors in the meantime.

Then, Mr Nesbitt told the Belfast Telegraph that he would be satisfied as long as he received such an assurance from the OFMDFM in writing.

"I have been assured this will be done over the weekend," he added.

The other three commissioners are Patricia MacBride whose brother was killed by the SAS and whose father died 17 months after being shot by loyalists, ex-interim commissioner Bertha McDougall and Brendan McAllister of Mediation Northern Ireland.

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