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## Nine years after the blast, Omagh searches for justice

[ALAN MACDERMID](#)

December 21 2007

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Death visited three generations of one family and blighted the lives of others as far away as Spain when the busy market town of Omagh was devastated on August 15, 1998.

Among the 29 dead were a woman heavily pregnant with twins, her mother, and her 18-month-old baby, as well as a schoolboy and attendant with a party of Spanish children on a summer language course.

There were early arrests, but they have led nowhere. Now, with each passing year, the chances of bringing the killers to justice looked increasingly remote.

advertisement Detectives investigating the bombing scoured the world for expertise to back up the forensic techniques they were pushing to the limit in order to nail

Sean Hoey.

But, while they were consulting Nasa, specialists at the FBI, and scientists in New York, Canada and Switzerland, slapdash procedures back home were undermining their efforts.

So, too, did the "calculated deception" of two police witnesses which, Mr Justice Weir said yesterday, made it impossible for him to accept their evidence. They are now under investigation.

As a result, nine years and £16m after the biggest atrocity in the course of the Irish Troubles, justice remains to be done for the 29 dead and hundreds injured at Omagh.

The judge, who said the evidence by the prosecution in the case did not meet the required standard, may have had in mind the cases of the Guildford Four and the Birmingham Six, victims of the most notorious miscarriages of justice thrown up by the Troubles.

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The police spent about £1m on forensics during the investigation, together with staff costs which ran to around £15m.

Mr Hoey, who has been in custody for the past four years, was also cleared of a series of other charges linked to a number of bomb and murder attacks on police and military installations across Northern Ireland in the run-up to the Omagh atrocity, which was carried out by dissident republican group the Real IRA.

Victor Barker, whose son James was among those killed, left the court with his weeping wife Donna-Marie. He said they were "very disappointed" at the verdict.

Mr Hoey will now be home for Christmas and his acquittal means that nobody in Northern Ireland has yet been convicted of carrying out the single worst terrorist atrocity in more than 30 years of violence.

Mr Justice Weir took just in excess of an hour-and-a-quarter to deliver his verdict following a 36-day trial which finished last January.

He said there had been unspeakable carnage in Omagh on the day the bomb exploded following three warnings which failed to give the exact location.

The judge added: "I am acutely aware that the stricken people of Omagh and every other right-thinking member of the Northern Ireland community would very much wish to see whoever was responsible for the outrageous offence of August 1998 and other serious crimes in this series of terrorist incidents convicted and punished for their crimes."

But he also said he had to bear firmly in mind the cardinal principle of the criminal law the standard of proof beyond reasonable doubt.

"The evidence against the accused in this case did not reach that immutable standard," he said. Afterwards, police involved in the case said they would work to ensure any organisational or procedural shortcomings were addressed.

A statement said: "Our primary focus will continue to bring all those responsible for these crimes, before the courts."

Mr Hoey's mother, Rita, insisted last night her son was innocent and supported the families' demand for an inquiry.

"Who has the most to fear from such an inquiry? What are the authorities north and south covering up?" she said.

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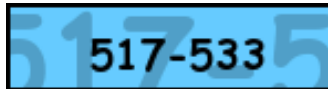
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