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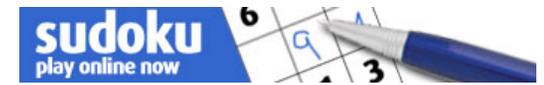
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Court hears 'sectarian fights' organised in run-up to killing

By Maeve Connolly

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SECTARIAN tension in Ballymena had reached such a level that teenagers may have been using the internet and mobile phones to organise fights in the run up to Michael McIlveen's murder.

Under cross-examination yesterday the key witness at the murder trial was asked whether he knew about previous "fights" and "skirmishes" at agreed points in the town centre such as Cameron's car park where the

MAN STRUCK ON STREET HAS TAKEN PLACE.

The teenager said he had "heard rumours" about such "meet ups" which, when asked, he described as "two groups from either side of the community meeting up to fight out their differences" but that he knew nothing more about them.

The witness, who cannot be identified because of his age, was asked by Laurence McCrudden QC whether he agreed there was mutual "distrust and dislike" between some young Catholics and Protestants and that prior to the attack relations "had been deteriorating" – to which he replied, "Yes".

Mr McCrudden, appearing for Christopher Francis Kerr, put it to the witness that on the day following the attack he would have spoken to many young people and that there would have been "one topic of conversation" as well as rumour and speculation about it.

The barrister suggested that the witness had gone to record a police interview the next day determined to "deliver the goods" by giving them the names of anyone he recognised from the alley that night.

However, the teenager replied: "I wanted to make sure that I told the truth. I wouldn't want to send someone down for something they didn't do."

Mr McCrudden asked how the witness could claim his client had kicked Michael "about 10 times" when he had described Mr Kerr as being behind him and put it to him that "not once did you see Kerr kicking Michael McIlveen nor laying a hand on him or a fist".

Mr McCrudden said there were only two minor marks on Michael's body and a cut on his hand and he suggested that the teenager had died from injuries caused by the baseball bat.

The witness replied: "I know for a fact what I saw. I was there, he wasn't. I'm not blind."

The witness was also questioned by Richard Weir QC about a comment he had made during the police interview which was taped less than 48 hours after the attack.

Mr Weir, appearing for Jeff Colin Lewis, said the remark "Get them put away" – made when the interviewing police officer had left the room – suggested the witness had a "deep desire" that people "went down", regardless of their actions on the night.

The witness said the comment had referred to his desire for justice for his 15- year-old friend who died from head injuries after being struck repeatedly with a baseball bat.

Mervyn Wilson Moon (20) has already pleaded guilty to murder and the court heard how he had swung the bat at Michael, knocking him to the ground, and then used the weapon to strike him at least four more times.

Mr Weir put it to the teenage witness that as he stood over his injured friend in a "swirling mass" of people, frightened, in danger and watching Moon "like a hawk" in dim light he would not have been able to see exactly what was happening and had exaggerated details to the police.

Acknowledging that the conditions were "difficult" the witness responded: "...but I do know what happened and I did see what happened".

Mr Weir asked the teenager if he had exaggerated the number of kicks he said the defendants had delivered and claimed the figure of more than 60 was inconsistent with the injuries Michael had received.

He went on to state that his client, Mr Lewis, had not kicked Michael "any more than once".

The trial continues.

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