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# Ceremony to mark Omagh anniversary to be boycotted

DAN KEENAN, Northern News Editor

PLANS TO commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Omagh bombing have been struck by protests and boycotts involving some of the victims' families, local clergy and elected representatives.

Many families linked to Omagh Support and Self Help Group, chaired by Michael Gallagher whose son Aidan died in the Real IRA attack, have said they will not attend the ceremony organised by Omagh council.

To be staged in the town on Friday, it will be attended by local churchmen, elected representatives and former Middle East hostage Terry Waite. However, it emerged last night that clergy from the four main churches will not attend the traditional support group ceremony to be held in the town two days later, on the Sunday closest to the date of the bombing.

Some families say they are angry at the way the council organised Friday's service, and at the planned attendance of unnamed political figures. They already criticised the council's organising of a new permanent memorial to the 29 who died in the bombing.

The dead included a woman who was pregnant with twins.

These families believe they have been snubbed by local clergy over their joint decision to attend the council ceremony on Friday and not to accept invitations to the Sunday wreath-laying memorial.

Kevin Skelton, whose wife died in the attack, said of the clergy's decision: "Our local clergy who have supported us down the years have refused to participate.

"I'm very, very disappointed. I'm shocked as I personally know some of the clergy involved and I would hold one of them in very high esteem."

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He was highly critical of the inscription to be included on the new memorial provided by the council. He also said some people would attend Friday's council-organised memorial whom he "just could not stomach".

"There are going to be politicians there from Britain, the South of Ireland . . . politicians from the North of Ireland. I would certainly have a lot of problems with them."

Godfrey Wilson, who lost his daughter Lorraine, said he thought it was a matter of "Christian duty" for churchmen to show respect to both services.

Mr Gallagher said: "Some of these clergy buried our loved ones. We can't believe they aren't coming. They are boycotting and marginalising the families."

The support group hopes to bring clergy based outside Omagh to attend their service on the 17th.

Omagh council responded to the unease over the commemorations with a statement yesterday.

It said arrangements "provide an opportunity for the bereaved, the injured, the emergency and support services and all those affected by the bomb to come together with the wider community in an act of remembrance".

It referred to the controversial inscription complained of by Mr Skelton. "The ceremony will include the dedication of the Garden of Light memorial which has been well received," it said.

The council also issued a later statement, claiming: "It is our understanding that the Omagh Support and Self-Help Group is encouraging its members to attend the 10th Anniversary Commemorative Ceremony on Friday 15 August as well as their personal memorial service."

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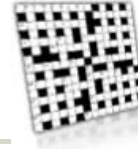


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