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Robert Hamill murder probe pledge to find the truth

By David Gordon
Tuesday, 13 January 2009

The Robert Hamill inquiry will shine a "powerful and unbiased spotlight" on the key issues surrounding the Portadown man's death, its opening public hearing was told today.

Almost 12 years after the 25-year-old Catholic father-of-two's murder, the public inquiry team launched the proceedings that will see around 160 witnesses give evidence in person over the forthcoming months.

A panel headed by a former English High Court judge will sift through conflicting accounts of the night in question and seek to establish the truth in a report due for publication next year.

The background to the case was detailed today in an opening statement by the leading counsel to the inquiry, Ashley Underwood QC. He stated that Mr Hamill's death occurred at a time when there was a "great mistrust" of policing and the criminal justice system on the part of Catholics here.

Mr Underwood continued: "The inquiry intends to shine a powerful and unbiased spotlight on the public concerns that gave rise to it being established, so that the truth can be revealed.

"The truth may show that the mistrust on the RUC and the criminal justice system was unjustified. If, on the other hand, the spotlight uncovers failures, whether on the part of individuals or organisations then recommendations can be made for the future.

"We hope that, by those means the inquiry will make a contribution to the break with the past that the peace process represents, and that Mr Hamill will not have died in vain."

The inquiry panel members are: chairman Sir Edwin Jowitt, a former justice of the High Court; Reverend Baroness Richardson of Calow, the Moderator of the Churches' Commission for Inter Faith Relations; and Sir John Evans, an ex-chief constable of the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary.

In his opening statement, Sir Edwin said: "As well as being a matter which has given rise to considerable public interest and concern, none of us should lose sight of the fact that Robert Hamill's death was and is a matter of sadness and grief to those who mourn him."

The inquiry panel plans to issue its final report in mid-2010.

Mr Hamill suffered fatal injuries in a sectarian attack in Portadown town centre in April 1997.

Four RUC officers were on duty in a police Land Rover parked close to the scene.

The public inquiry will examine criticism of the RUC in relation to the officers in the vehicle. It will also examine the subsequent murder investigation, as well as an allegation that a suspect was tipped off by a policeman. The role of the Director of Public Prosecutions will also be scrutinised.

Security forces deny wrongdoing in the case, but retired Canadian Judge Peter Cory reviewed the case and advised that the allegations of police misconduct warranted a public inquiry. Legal challenges delayed the opening of the probe for more than four years.

Mr Hamill died after he was attacked by a loyalist mob during a night out with friends, but claims that police at the scene failed to protect him and subsequently frustrated the investigation caused major controversy.

The Hamill family and their solicitor Rosemary Nelson campaigned to keep the case in the

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public eye, though the controversy grew when Mrs Nelson was killed in a loyalist bomb attack amid allegations of security force involvement.

The circumstances of the Hamill case saw it compared to the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence and the subsequent handling of the investigation by the Metropolitan police.

The Robert Hamill Inquiry begins today in the Interpoint Centre in Belfast, the same building where Mrs Nelson's inquiry is being held.

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