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Local & National

Omagh: a final quest to get justice

Monday, April 07, 2008

By Lesley-Anne Henry

A landmark legal action being taken by relatives of the Omagh bomb victims will start in Belfast today.

The £14m civil action, scheduled in the High Court for the next four weeks, is thought to be the families' last hope for justice.

In the first legal action of its kind writs were served on five men, Michael McKeivitt, Seamus Daly, Seamus McKenna, Liam Campbell and Colm Murphy, in July 2002. The families believe all five were involved in the 1998 atrocity which killed 29 people, including a mother pregnant with twins.

Members of nine bomb victim families were named among the 22 plaintiffs - however, a number of families have pulled out of the legal battle. It is understood seven families are now suing for physical and psychological damage.

A high-powered legal team headed by top London solicitor, Jason McCue, has been hired with senior counsel Lord Brennan QC representing the families.

Speaking ahead of the special non-jury case, Mr McCue said: "Three tonnes of boxed court evidence travelled from London to Belfast. It feels symbolic of the weight the families have tirelessly carried on their backs during their courageous journey to court in search of justice. Today the content of those boxes will be revealed and in due course the judge will rule. Just getting here is a moral victory for the families."

It is understood that court proceedings could shift to Dublin in May to hear evidence from 24 Garda officers.

Michael Gallagher, whose son 21-year-old Aiden was killed in the blast, said their quest for justice had been difficult: "It has been a long and difficult seven years and there have been many struggles and hurdles. We haven't had any reassurance from the Gardaí that officers will give evidence. We have concerns about the Irish government dragging their heels But nothing can take away from the fact that it is a magnificent achievement that we have finally got to court.

"We are not seeking vengeance we are seeking justice."

In December last year, south Armagh man Sean Hoey was cleared of 29 counts of murder relating to the 1998 Real IRA atrocity.

During his lengthy trial the families were able to watch in Omagh proceedings via videolink. This time, however, no arrangements have been made, meaning the families have to make a 150-mile round trip every day.

Victor Barker, whose 12-year-old son James was also killed in the blast, is expected to travel from England for the hearing.

He said he would like to see senior RUC officers from the time called to give evidence.

"I have already commented before that I think the state should be responsible for prosecuting criminals and that's still my view."

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