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The SDLP last night asked nationalists to stay away from both the homecoming parade and the Sinn Fein-led counter-protest in Belfast on Sunday.

The political stew continued to simmer as the Parades Commission declined to conduct a formal review of its decision to give the go-ahead to the parade and protest.

But the SDLP said there were a number of steps which could help defuse the increasingly volatile atmosphere surrounding the event and feeding into the political paralysis at Stormont.

Alex Attwood MLA said the wider nationalist community supported neither the military parade nor the protest.

“Voluntary changes could help a little to change the tone and character of Sunday. In particular, public statements from the British Army and

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political leaderships — including that there are serious differences in the city of Belfast around the military parade and the British Army — could contribute to defusing the run-up to Sunday,” he said.

What are these?

“The nationalist community did not support the military parade in the first instance and does not support the protest in the second instance. That continues to be the broad view of nationalism.

“It is the reason why the SDLP advises that the nationalist community should go to neither the military parade nor the protest on Sunday.

“That is the dignified and proper response, not least to those elements in unionism and nationalism that are escalating tensions in the run-up to Sunday.”

But a barrage of unionist statements yesterday struck a strongly emotive and defiant note. The Ulster Unionist Party accused Sinn Fein of a clearly orchestrated and politically motivated attempt to turn the area for Sunday’s homecoming parade into another kind of ‘conflict zone’.

“There is no political agenda to this parade. The men and women involved are not, in any sense, triumphalist. They are simply pleased to be returning to their friends and families,” a party statement said.

Ulster Unionist peer Lord Maginnis argued anyone organising and participating in the Sinn Fein counter-demonstration will be guilty of “blatant arrogance and deceit”.

“It would be totally hypocritical,” he said, “that people like Martin McGuinness can travel abroad to be paraded as role models and to advise other communities on complexities of peacemaking, when they are both unwilling and unable to allow progress to develop unhindered at home.”

The County Grand Orange Lodge of Belfast said: “We encourage all to support the parade, as we show our appreciation for the heroes who have served and are still serving around the world fighting terrorism.”

Sinn Fein did not issue any fresh statement yesterday, but earlier Gerry Adams defended the Sinn Fein decision to protest and argued that while relatives have a right to welcome their loved ones home, the Secretary of State Shaun Woodward should have advised against the homecoming march.

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