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Rights body chief defends intervention on detainees

DISSIDENT ARRESTS

By Allison Morris

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Monica McWilliams, head of the Human Rights Commission, yesterday rebuffed criticism from members of the DUP and defended her decision to visit Antrim police station.

Ms McWilliams spent several hours in the Serious Crime Suite on Monday night inspecting the conditions and facilities in which suspects are being held in connection with the dissident republican murder of two soldiers and a policeman earlier this month.

The visit was in response to a request from the family of one of the men who has since been released without charge.

DUP assembly member Diane Dodds said the visit was “inappropriate” and that it appeared “like a desperate bid by Ms McWilliams to look relevant”.

“At a time when the police [are] actively pursuing an investigation into the brutal murders of Constable Stephen Carroll and Sappers Mark Quinsey and Patrick Azimkar, it is extremely dangerous for the Human Rights Commission to be making public comment around this issue,” Mrs Dodds said.

“The majority of people care too much about helping the police to secure justice for the three brave men callously murdered to tolerate unwise public interventions like this from an unelected quango chair.”

However, Ms McWilliams said: “I would like to reiterate, so that there can be no mistake, the purpose of the commission’s visit to Antrim police station was to examine the conditions of detention.

“The focus was on the facilities within which people are being detained for lengthy periods, not the investigation.

“I met with all of the individuals. While they had no complaints about their treatment by the custody officers – in fact the opposite; they all said all their medical requests had been met – they were suffering because of the basic facilities they are being held in.

“These small, concrete, windowless cells were designed for short stays and the lack of fresh air was taking its toll on some of the individuals.

“We will be compiling our findings which will be passed on to the chief constable, the Policing Board and [NIO] minister Paul Goggins.”

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