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Republicans' commitment to peace and justice put to test

By Allison Morris

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The murder of Robert McCartney had political ramifications that reverberated far beyond Northern Ireland, creating the biggest crisis in the peace process since the assembly's collapse.

A campaign for justice by the dead man's partner and sisters soon gained publicity around the world.

The case was discussed in Washington's corridors of power, as the women met US president George Bush, and

at the European Parliament at Strasbourg after talks with EU president Josep Borrell.

Germany presented the women with a national award for their "courage and vision". They were also jointly presented with the Irish Person of the Year Award.

Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern both voiced support for the sisters.

Massive pressure was put on Sinn Fein at what was seen as a make-or-break time for the already struggling peace process.

More than a decade on from the first IRA ceasefire, the actions of members of the organisation were again headline news.

During the trial two of the main prosecution witnesses, Brendan Devine and Ed Gowdy, both said they had met senior IRA representatives after the death of the father-of-two.

In March 2005 the paramilitary group issued a statement saying it had held a meeting that lasted more than five hours with Mr McCartney's sisters and his fiancée, Bridgeen Hagans, and had given them a detailed account of its investigations.

The statement said two of the four men involved in the murder of the 33-year-old and the assault on Mr Devine were IRA members.

It said that the organisation, which was on ceasefire, had offered to shoot those it deemed responsible – an offer the McCartney family rejected, saying they wanted the killers brought to justice before the courts.

But while the sisters' campaigning captured the media's attention, their efforts

to keep their brother's death in the spotlight came at a heavy price.

The Short Strand community where people had forged close friendships throughout the dark years of the Troubles was divided.

In a republican area where almost every resident was a friend or relative of either the McCartneys or at least one of those under suspicion, the community fractured.

Ms Hagans and her two young sons moved out of the home she had shared with Robert.

Nine months after the fatal stabbing all of the McCartney sisters had left their homes in the small nationalist enclave in east Belfast, saying they felt they could no longer live there.

Sinn Fein, which had made history by winning its first ever council seat in east Belfast in 2001, lost the

Mountpottinger seat in elections in 2005, four months after Mr McCartney's murder.

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