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O'Loan says Omagh families deserve truth

DAN KEENAN, Northern News Editor

RELATIVES OF the 29 people murdered in the Omagh bombing have a right to the truth about what happened 10 years ago, the former policing ombudsman has said.

Speaking yesterday at the commemoration for the dead and injured organised by the Omagh Support and Self-Help Group, Dame Nuala O'Loan backed calls for the facts of the atrocity to be established.

"We are gathered here today to remember all those who died in Omagh and to express our support and our ongoing sympathy for the relatives," said Ms O'Loan.

"It's a terribly difficult time. I think that the Omagh families have the right to know what happened that day. Insofar as that can be established, I think they have that right."

Ms O'Loan, whose report into the failings of the original police investigation stirred such controversy in 2001, said: "I did what I could as police ombudsman to attempt to establish that." She had not been invited to Friday's civic memorial organised by the local council.

Michael Gallagher, chairman of the families' support group, said yesterday's service was a symbol of their defiance.

"We have never allowed terrorists to dictate to us, nor anyone else. We will continue to do as we have done over the past 10 years, to challenge the terrorists wherever we can and to challenge governments for not upholding law and order . . . The only proper tribute to the dead of Omagh 10 years on must be that a full cross-Border public inquiry should be backed," he said.

"Otherwise the system should continue to fail. Those people should hold their head in shame and not make the token gestures that they have done in recent weeks."

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He was supported in his call by local independent Assembly member Kieran Deeny. "I'm 100 per cent behind the call. We have completely lost confidence in the justice system during the last 10 years."

Taoiseach Brian Cowen said on Friday that he would not commit to such an inquiry given that court proceedings were ongoing in both Dublin and Belfast.

The Omagh relatives are continuing with their civil action against the men they believe are responsible for the bombing. Evidence has been heard in courts in both jurisdictions.

Colm Murphy, the only man to have been convicted in relation to Omagh, has had his appeal allowed and is challenging attempts to hold a retrial.

Mr Gallagher said the presence at the commemoration of those associated with the victims of the 1993 Shankill Road bombing was "a wonderful show of unity".

"It is important that victims come together. We are all different, we don't agree on all things. But we do agree that we should live in a peaceful society."

Mr Gallagher, in common with many of the murdered victims' families, said he was unable to attend last Friday's event.

"For very sad reasons I could not be here because I didn't feel comfortable, as did many of the other families."

The group's vice-chairman Kevin Skelton said: "There were people here on Friday that I certainly could not have coped with. I probably would have got arrested if I had've been there."

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