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Wednesday, January 7, 2009

## Hamill inquiry confident of finding truth behind murder

GERRY MORIARTY, Northern Editor

THE INQUIRY into the 1997 murder of Robert Hamill, of which public hearings begin in Belfast next Tuesday, is convinced it will establish the truth behind the killing of the 25-year-old Portadown Catholic.

The inquiry team plans to complete its final report by the middle of next year and to operate within a projected budget of £36 million (€39.8 million).

It has devised a "virtual reality" computerised model of the area in Portadown where he was attacked to assist witnesses and lawyers.

Mr Hamill was beaten senseless in Portadown town centre by a loyalist mob in April 1997 as he returned home from a night out with friends. Some of his attackers cried, "Die you Fenian bastard," as they assaulted him, witnesses reported. He died 11 days later in the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast with his partner Caroline by his bedside. The couple had two young boys, Shane and Ryan. Three months after he died their daughter Nicole was born.

Members of the extended Hamill family pressed for the inquiry because they believed the RUC seriously and in some instances wilfully mishandled the investigation into the sectarian killing, and believed Mr Hamill could have been saved if RUC officers sitting in a police Land Rover near the murder scene had intervened.

Former northern secretary Paul Murphy set up the inquiry following the recommendation of Canadian Judge Peter Cory. The inquiry, chaired by former English high court judge, Sir Edwin Jowitt, formally opened in May 2005. The two other members of the inquiry panel are the Rev Baroness (Kathleen) Richardson, moderator of the Free Churches Council of England and Wales, and Sir John Evans, former chief constable of Devon and Cornwall police.

Since May 2005 the inquiry team has collated over 20,000 documents, conducted "in-house interviews" with more than 230 witnesses and set out in detail how the public hearings should proceed from next Tuesday at the Interpoint Centre in Belfast.

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No one has been convicted of the killing, notwithstanding allegations by members of the Hamill family that it is widely known in Portadown who was involved in the assault, and that some of these people allegedly taunted the family about the killing.

Ashley Underwood QC, leading counsel to the inquiry, said yesterday that some 160 witnesses would give evidence. "I believe that when the inquiry is completed we will have established the truth behind the killing of Robert Hamill," he said.

Of the witnesses, 50 will have paid-for legal representation. In all 11 legal teams will be involved. A feature of the inquiry is a computerised model of the area in central Portadown where Robert Hamill was assaulted, which will provide a "virtual reality view of the scene from any direction or viewpoint". It was created by one of the technical experts working with the Bloody Sunday Inquiry.

While the overall cost of the Bloody Sunday, Rosemary Nelson, Billy Wright, and Robert Hamill inquiries - estimated currently at £250 million, with most of that due to the Bloody Sunday probe - has generated political and public concern, the Hamill team believes it will complete its work relatively promptly and on budget.

So far the inquiry has cost £18.8 million, with final cost estimated at £36 million. The inquiry plans to have the public hearings finished by May, with final submissions in the autumn. Thereafter the panel will devise its report, which it hopes to have completed by the middle of 2010.

Among the allegations that the inquiry will consider are: that the RUC failed to intervene even though police were in a Land Rover close to the scene; that an RUC officer told a suspect how to destroy evidence that could connect him to the killing, and briefed him on how the investigation was proceeding; that police failed to maintain the assault scene and did not detain suspects on the night; that in a number of other areas police were seriously deficient in their investigations; and that the RUC also issued a series of contradictory statements about the killing, initially suggesting that Mr Hamill died as a result of a confrontation between opposing nationalists and loyalists, but eventually conceding that he was the innocent victim of a sectarian loyalist assault.

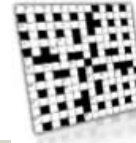


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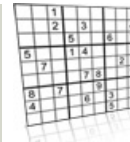
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