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Tuesday, July 8, 2008

Cost of inquiries into past killings 'hampering PSNI'

GERRY MORIARTY, Northern Editor

THE COST of investigating killings that happened during the Troubles is "unsustainable" and is hampering current policing and attempts to clamp down on paramilitaries, according to the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

The committee yesterday reported that the Historical Enquiries Team, which is investigating more than 3,200 killings between 1968 and 1998, was unlikely to complete its task by the target date of 2011 and within its £34 million (€43 million) budget.

The committee found that the team, which was established in 2005 and comes under the umbrella of the PSNI, had so far re-opened 1,100 cold cases with just one case referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions.

It noted, however, that the re-opened cases go back to early in the Troubles and that as it examines later cases, when there was better recording of evidence along with computerised information and the possible availability of witnesses, prosecutions were more likely to follow.

However, the committee, which is chaired by Conservative MP Sir Patrick Cormack and has four members from Northern parties - Gregory Campbell and Sammy Wilson of the DUP, Lady (Sylvia) Hermon of the Ulster Unionist Party and Dr Alasdair McDonnell of the SDLP - raised several queries about whether the team was meeting its remit to bring resolution for victims' families.

"The high annual cost of inquiries into past events is financially unsustainable," it reported. It is estimated that the cost could reach £45 million. "We are not convinced that the funding is being targeted as effectively as it might be," the committee added.

"We recommend that alternative ways of prioritising cases are identified so as to focus resources on those cases where the next-of-kin of the deceased specifically request it or where the existence of forensics or other exhibits provides investigative opportunities which could contribute to a successful prosecution case."

The committee also referred to the high cost of the various inquiries into controversial killings, noting that the cost of the Bloody Sunday

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inquiry, which has yet to report, is £183 million.

Its report "recommends that the Northern Ireland Office takes further steps to control the costs of statutory inquiries and that inquiries other than those already under way or announced should only be established if agreed by the Northern Ireland Assembly".

Sir Patrick said that with dissident paramilitaries attacking the PSNI and other current problems facing the police, the PSNI must be able to focus on the present rather than the past. "The PSNI faces significant demands in terms of its work with all of the different historical investigations and we are concerned about the impact of this in relation to the police service's primary role in policing the present," he said.

The committee also found that investigating the past was having an adverse affect on the workings of the Police Ombudsman's office as past cases, where RUC malpractice was suspected, were referred to the ombudsman's office. It found that new ombudsman Al Hutchinson was unable to properly handle current complaints.

"The number of complaints about the former Royal Ulster Constabulary arising from the years of the Troubles and the inadequate provision of additional resources have compromised the ombudsman's ability to investigate complaints against the PSNI," it reported.

The committee also expressed concerns about the failure to deal with long-standing inquests and said the issue of protecting informants, while providing information about the past, must also be addressed. It said that consideration should be given to establishing an independent body, which was not linked to the PSNI, to deal with past killings.

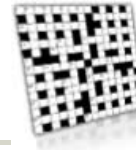
The committee appeared satisfied that any major changes or revised financial planning should await the report of the Eames/Bradley inquiry into how to deal with the past. Its report is due later this year.

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