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**Politics****Fury at Hain's rugby wreath plan**

Minister wants to pay tribute to 13 shot dead by British soldiers at Croke Park in 1920

**Henry McDonald, Ireland editor**

**Sunday February 11, 2007**

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While history is being made today when Ireland's rugby union team run out on to Croke Park to take on the French, a row is raging about the next Six Nations clash at the home of Gaelic sports.

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The Observer has learnt that, before the Ireland v England game in two weeks' time, the Northern Ireland Office is considering plans for Secretary of State Peter Hain to lay a wreath at a memorial to 13 Gaelic sports fans shot dead by British forces inside the stadium in 1920 and issue an apology from the British government for what has become known as the first 'Bloody Sunday' massacre. Both Irish rugby veterans and Unionist MPs are up in arms at the proposals.

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Former Ireland international and British Lion Trevor Ringland said last night that the proposal for such a politically charged ceremony posed great dangers for peace and reconciliation. Ringland, who runs the anti-sectarian 'One Small Step' campaign in Northern Ireland, said: 'The fact that this game is being played at Croke Park, thanks to the generous decision of the Gaelic Athletic Association, will have positive ripple effects for the future.'

'But plans for a wreath-laying ceremony and the apology will only mix sport with politics. It will bring the politics of the 20th century into the attempts at reconciliation in the 21st century. The government should think again before going ahead with something like this.'

Democratic Unionist MP Jeffrey Donaldson accused the Northern Ireland Office of 'monumental stupidity' in contemplating the wreath-laying ceremony: 'Whoever thought up this bright idea ought to consign it now to the dustbin of history. Rugby has always been a community where politics and sports do not mix. I sincerely hope this plan is dropped immediately, as it would outrage thousands of rugby fans, not only in Northern Ireland but also across this island.'

The Northern Ireland Office has yet to decide finally if the Secretary of State will take part in the ceremony. He is scheduled to attend the match.

Meanwhile, English rugby fans are likely to encounter republican protests at the historically resonant clash with Ireland. The breakaway nationalist group Republican Sinn Fein (RSF), which opposes the peace process, has confirmed it will picket the match. The organisation was one of three republican groups that organised protests against a loyalist parade through Dublin city centre last year. Demonstrations against the 'Love Ulster' march degenerated into some of the worst rioting Dublin had seen in decades.

Garda sources in Dublin told The Observer they were monitoring the RSF and several other anti-Good Friday Agreement republican factions in the run-up to the clash at Croke Park.

'They managed to turn O'Connell Street upside down last year and we were caught napping. They brought hundreds of young men looking for trouble on to the streets. We can't afford for that to happen again,' one senior officer said.

The political allies of the Continuity IRA said playing the game at Croke Park - the home of Gaelic sports in Ireland - was part of a process to 'normalise the occupation of Ireland'.

Des Dalton, RSF's vice-president, said: 'The political symbolism of inviting the national team of a country which forcibly occupies part of Ireland to Croke Park is something Irish republicans are determined to publicly protest against.'

Dissident republican groups are focusing their protests on the playing of 'God Save the Queen'. They have viewed Croke Park as hallowed ground since the 1920 massacre, which took place hours after an IRA hit squad, set up by Michael Collins, killed some British agents in the city.

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