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News

We do not want to submit relatives to a further agony of hopes raised only to be dashed

Sunday, January 14, 2007

As long ago as April 1998 I presented to Dr Mowlam, then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my report as Victims' Commissioner entitled "We Will Remember Them".

In that report I referred to what I called "the poignant category of the 'Disappeared', in the following words: "I would voice a fervent appeal, on behalf of all those whose loved ones have disappeared without trace, that those who can offer information about their fate and where bodies may lie should now do so.

"I realise that many of those in possession of such information may fear the risk of inculpating themselves, but I am sure cast-iron arrangements could be made, if necessary through trusted intermediaries, to report such information anonymously and in confidence.

"Many of the relatives have faced up long ago to the probability that a loved one has been killed, but it is one of the most fundamental of human instincts to seek certain knowledge of the fate of a husband or wife, son or daughter, brother or sister.

"Common humanity cries out for this modest act of mercy."

The following year, 1999, saw the creation of an Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains, with members appointed jointly by the British and Irish governments. Since then, I have served as one of the two Commissioners, first of all alongside John Wilson, a former Tanaiste, and more recently Frank Murray, a former Secretary to the Irish government.

Legislation ensured that information provided to the Commission to facilitate recovery could not be used for the purpose of prosecution, Mr Mitchell McLaughlin on behalf of the republican movement encouraged co-operation with the Commission and PIRA acknowledged responsibility for the deaths of nine persons murdered and buried secretly.

As information was supplied to the Commission through reliable intermediaries, we were initially hopeful of making early and substantial progress.

In the event, only four of the designated nine were discovered, two as a direct result of information provided to us. As is well known, the body of Jean McConville was discovered at a site different from, though relatively close to, that notified to the Commission.

In the aftermath of a number of unsuccessful exploratory efforts, inevitably bringing further stress and disappointment to sorrowing relatives, we secured from the two sponsoring governments approval to move into a more pro-active mode, employing for this purpose a skilled forensic scientist.

Since then, there has been further direct and constructive contact with the republican movement, and most recently Archbishop Brady has responded readily and constructively to an approach from the Commission to make a Church appeal for further information, which has begun in the Armagh archdiocese and is to be extended across Ireland.

To facilitate the secure transmission of information, we have established a confidential telephone line (008000-555 855 00) and a Post Office Box (ICLVR, PO Box 10827, Dublin 2).

Inevitably and understandably, people will ask if and when further "digs " can be anticipated.

This will happen when, and only when, the provision of further reliable information and the use of less invasive techniques indicates the strong possibility of a positive outcome.

We do not want to submit relatives to a further agony of hopes raised only to be dashed.

While we hope and pray for success, we cannot assure it.

But above all, my colleague and I will keep in regular contact with the relatives of the Disappeared to assure them that everything possible will be done to help them lay a loved one, after all this agonising time,

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