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Woodward urged to release funds for Haddock UVF probe

By Barry McCaffrey

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Secretary of State Shaun Woodward was last night challenged to explain why he will not release more funding

for a police inquiry investigating Special Branch agent Mark Haddock's links to 19 murders.

In January 2007, the then police ombudsman Nuala O'Loan recommended that Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde investigate evidence that the Mount Vernon UVF leader had been protected from prosecution because of his role as an agent.

Despite public furore it was not until June this year that it was announced that the Historic Enquiries Team (HET) was being given money to investigate Haddock's links to 19 murders and 10 attempted murders.

The HET investigation, codenamed Operation Ballast, was described as one of the most important inquiries in the history of the Troubles.

Earlier this summer detectives charged two north Belfast brothers with murder.

It was claimed other leading loyalists, including Haddock, pictured, would also face the courts as a result of Operation Ballast's ongoing investigations.

However, nationalists reacted with anger yesterday after the chief constable said the NIO would not bring forward funding for the inquiry.

"Because of its independent status in Operation Ballast we sought to bring forward £2 million of the HET money forward a year to allow us to carry out that work," he told the Policing Board yesterday.

"It is work that is already under way. I was advised as early as this morning that it is now no longer going to be allowed so we have to manage that."

He said he would now hold crisis talks with the HET "to work out what we do because that work is under way and there is a public commitment to deliver it".

The Haddock investigation was funded solely by the NIO and does not come from the PSNI's day-to-day budget, which is also under pressure.

SDLP Policing Board member Dolores Kelly said Operation Ballast was acknowledged as "one of the most important police investigations of the Troubles" and an explanation was needed for the NIO's stance.

"It is an absolute disgrace that the secretary of state is trying to close this inquiry down by starving it of funding," she said.

Sinn Fein's Alex Maskey also warned that nationalists would oppose any attempt to shut down the HET investigation.

"Any suggestion that these serious issues will not be dealt with because of a deliberate decision to withhold funding would be a disgrace.

“The British government gave a commitment to fund Operation Ballast and must not be allowed to renege on it.”

An NIO spokeswoman last night insisted it was “not a question of money being stopped”.

“Any extra resources sought by the PSNI for the work of the HET in this financial year has to be judged against the overall challenging financial position,” she said.

“Funding issues are currently subject to ongoing discussions involving the PSNI, the Policing Board and the NIO.

“These are taking place in the context of the need for everyone to take decisions on spending proposals within the current economic climate and within the very significant public resources – well in excess of £1.1bn in this financial year - allocated to the PSNI.”

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