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Thursday, 4 December 2008

The police are spending more than £5 million a year to service public inquiries into controversial killings during the Northern Ireland Troubles, the region's chief constable revealed today.

Sir Hugh Orde said the Police Service of Northern Ireland's £100,000 a week costs were in addition to £250 million of taxpayers' money that has already been spent on the Bloody Sunday Inquiry and three other independent probes into contentious incidents during the conflict.

The continuing financial commitment to the investigations comes as the service is attempting to manage a £130 million cut to its budget over the next three years.

Sir Hugh only achieved a balanced budget for this financial year after the Government gave him permission to draw down money from the 2010

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budget.

What are these?

As well as the near £200 million bill for Lord Saville's re-investigation of Bloody Sunday, around £50 million has been spent on inquiries into the deaths of Rosemary Nelson, a solicitor killed by loyalists, Robert Hamill, a Catholic killed by a loyalist gang, and Billy Wright, a loyalist paramilitary leader gunned down by republicans while he was serving at the Maze prison.

Sir Hugh told members of his watchdog body - Northern Ireland Policing Board - that there was an urgent need for the Government to fund legacy issues separately so he could concentrate his resources on policing the present.

"There is one unique pressure, once you've taken out pay and pensions. It is the issue of legacy," he said at the board's monthly meeting in Belfast.

"It doesn't go away and currently we are finding that legal costs to support those involved in public inquiries and support those independent investigations brought in by my predecessor to look for example, at the Rosemary Nelson case are increasing week on week.

"That's not to mention the number of staff we are deploying in this area to support those inquiries.

"In stark terms my costs currently out of our current policing budget are running at around £100,000 per week.

"That is an additional cost to the parliamentary answers to the cost of public inquiries (the £250 million), that cost does not certainly include policing costs and I suspect it does not include the costs to other services servicing those inquiries."

Sir Hugh is also facing a potential legal bill of £87 million for officers who weren't offered adequate hearing protection during firearms training during the Troubles era.

"Every penny I spend on these matters and, indeed, the legacy of the Stevens inquiry (into alleged loyalist collusion with security forces) comes out of current policing money and we now have to make a serious case, in my judgment, to look at how that expenditure can be dealt with outwith our policing budget."

He said that was the only way the PSNI could achieve financial stability in the coming years.

Away from the public inquiries, PSNI has already been given £32 million to set up a unit to investigate more than 3,000 other Troubles killings.

The Historical Enquiries Team (HET) has experienced its own money problems and faced being wound down last month until the Government pledged an additional £1 million to keep its work going.

None of the four inquiries have yet to report while another high-profile probe into the loyalist murder of Catholic solicitor Pat Finucane has not yet begun.

Sir Hugh said he intended to meet Northern Ireland's First and Deputy First Ministers Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness to discuss how the legacy issue would be dealt with if and when policing powers are devolved to Stormont.

At the board's meeting in Belfast, Sir Hugh also reiterated the call for better support services for the victims of human trafficking in Northern Ireland.

His remarks came following the arrest of ten people in Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland and Wales yesterday in connection with a suspected international sex trafficking ring which has brought dozens of women from Africa and Latin America and forced them into prostitution all over Ireland.

Five people of those arrested in the Irish Republic were released without charge today.

Sir Hugh said ten victims of trafficking had already been rescued by his officers on both sides of the border.

However he criticised the lack of support available for these women after they had been saved from the trade.

"The criminal side is our main concern but obviously there is a substantial human side and a clear gap exists in Northern Ireland between the needs of the victims of this crime and services available to them," he said.

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Northern Ireland Troubles



A Conflict in Pictures

"Currently the pressure is being taken by voluntary groups, who are outstanding in their commitment, but it is clear that more help needs to be given to these groups and indeed more support from government to bridge that gap whilst we manage the enforcement side."

During the meeting Sir Hugh also refused to be drawn on his decision to apply for the vacant Metropolitan Police Commissioner's job.

He fended off a question from Democratic Unionist board member Ian Paisley jnr by saying his focus remained on his current job.

"Yes I have registered my interest along with nine other outstanding candidates so let's wait and see," he said.

"At the moment my interest is well and truly here."

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