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Tuesday, 21 October 2008

Releasing secret British Government security files on the Omagh bombing could undermine the fight against international terrorism, it was claimed yesterday.

Former MP Lord Maginnis told a British-Irish politicians' body that the handing over of surveillance information to victims' families could set a dangerous precedent for the future.

"We have to give our intelligence agencies a degree of security so that we don't undermine what is necessary for the protection of our country, of Europe or of our soldiers abroad," Lord Maginnis said.

The Ulster Unionist Party elder was speaking to a motion on the issue at the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly which he was attending with unionist colleagues after an 18-year boycott.

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British Labour MP Andrew Mackinlay earlier called for transcripts of telephone conversations that may involve the Omagh bomb suspects to be made available by the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ).

What are these?

The motion was eventually approved by the Assembly but was opposed during a debate by Lord Maginnis and former Northern Ireland minister Michael Mates.

Lord Maginnis told the body, meeting in Newcastle on Tyne: "There is a war that is being fought against international terrorism.

"Those who are responsible for the collection of intelligence must not be faced with a situation where a precedent is created and where in fact we may undermine this.

"In the future it may be New York, Bali, London, Madrid or somewhere else at present untouched by violence."

He added: "I acknowledge fully the good intentions of politicians but on this occasion I would plead that our heads rule our hearts."

However campaigner Michael Gallagher, whose son Aidan died in the bombing, said Lord Maginnis's comments were "sad".

He added: "Releasing this information would be invaluable to the civil action and give closure to families of victims who have suffered long enough.

"The release of the information would be firmly in the public interest."

Fine Gael TD Brian Hayes also told the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly that the body needed to send out a very strong message of support to the families of victims.

"More could have been done to help the Omagh families. I think it is an absolute disgrace that 10 years after the worst atrocity in the Troubles, these families are still looking for justice.

"I also believe it is astonishing that the Irish government has not been more forthcoming and stronger in the appeal to get information for this civil action proceedings."

The Omagh bomb was the worst atrocity during the Troubles, killing 29 people including a woman pregnant with twins.

Hundreds more were injured when the Real IRA bombed the Co Tyrone town on a busy Saturday afternoon in August 1998.

Although nobody has been convicted for the terrorist attack, families of some of the victims have taken a landmark civil case against five men they believe responsible for carrying out the attack.

Mr Mackinlay's motion called on the UK Government to immediately disclose to the legal counsel of the families of the victims of the Omagh Bombing details of and all information relating to, and arising from, the request made by the RUC to GCHQ for surveillance of those subsequently suspected of preparing and carrying out the atrocity in Omagh a decade ago, including transcripts and timelines.

After the adoption of the motion the Assembly said it will raise the issue with Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Irish Taoiseach Brian Cowen.

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