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The deaths of three policemen killed by an IRA landmine in Northern Ireland are set to be re-examined after new evidence was uncovered in a classified report, it was revealed today.

A coroner in Belfast has requested that fresh inquests are held into the killings of Royal Ulster Constabulary officers John Quinn, Allan McCloy and Paul Hamilton in October 1982.

The three died instantly when a remotely detonated bomb buried in a roadside culvert near Lurgan, Co Armagh, exploded as they passed in their armoured police car.

Coroner John Leckey said confidential reports he had seen contained significant information that was not available when an original inquest into the deaths was held in 1983.

He was given permission to view the documents as part of his probe into

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six alleged "shoot-to-kill" operations carried out by the RUC in the Co Armagh area in the weeks after the murders of the three officers.

The top secret reports were compiled by former Greater Manchester Police Deputy Chief Constable John Stalker and Sir Colin Sampson of the West Yorkshire Police.

Mr Leckey said while he did not have the power to establish new inquests he would be asking the Attorney General to do so.

"I will ask him to direct that new inquests are held on the basis of the additional and new evidence," he said.

The coroner would not indicate the nature of the evidence he had seen but his move will undoubtedly fuel existing speculation as to a possible link between the "shoot-to-kill" deaths and the landmine killings and, indeed, whether or not the attack on the officers could have been prevented.

In 1984 Mr Stalker was commissioned to conduct an external investigation into the six RUC shootings after claims that the officers involved had deliberately set out to kill.

Sir Colin completed his work after Mr Stalker was removed from the role over a matter unrelated to the inquiry.

Their findings have never been made public.

The "shoot to kill" allegations refer to three separate incidents in late 1982:

- The shooting dead of IRA men Gervaise McKerr, Eugene Toman and John Burns in Lurgan on November 11, 1982.
- The shooting of Catholic teenager Michael Tighe near Craigavon on November 24, 1982.
- The killings of INLA suspects Seamus Grew and Roddy Carroll near Armagh city on December 12, 1982.

In the wake of these deaths there were claims that Mr Burns and Mr Toman had been suspected of involvement in the landmine attack on the RUC officers.

Mr Leckey has requested that Police Service of Northern Ireland Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde now release the Sampson and Stalker reports to the court so that inquests into the six killings can finally get under way after years of delay.

"I am satisfied that in general terms the Stalker and Sampson reports are relevant for inquest purposes," he said.

"Without doubt further evidence did come to light as a consequence of the investigation undertaken."

Mr Leckey revealed that recent changes to the legal framework would enable him to broaden the remit of the inquests beyond trying to establish simply when and how the victims died.

He explained that the eventual verdicts may take "a variety of forms and no longer must it be an anodyne, brief, neutral, factual statement".

The coroner said he also had the power to compel anyone suspected of being involved in the deaths to give evidence, though he noted they would not be obliged to answer questions that might incriminate them.

After the hearing in Belfast's coroner's court Mark Thompson, a spokesman for Relatives for Justice - a victims' group that represents some of the relatives of those killed in the alleged "shoot to kill" incidents - called on the chief constable to release the reports.

"We're in a new political environment," he said.

"There's a new landscape, it's 20-odd years later, the families deserve to know the truth and that means providing the information to the court."

Mr Thompson said the coroner's decision to call for new inquests into the deaths of the RUC officers left many unanswered questions.

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"Obviously this is speculative at this stage, but one would question has he (Mr Leckey) seen information that would incline him or deem it necessary or appropriate to now re-examine those killings on the basis of information that possibly the killings may have been prevented," he said.

"Those families (of the policemen) too now find themselves in the midst of this, embroiled in this whole incident in which they too will want to know the truth, and they are entitled to the truth and the public are entitled to the truth.

"So the onus is on the chief constable to do the right thing - this boil needs to be lanced, the families don't want to wait another 20 years for answers."

Sir Hugh is currently assessing whether or not to reclassify the Stalker and Sampson reports from their current respective status of 'secret' and 'top secret'.

Mr Leckey is also investigating the death of IRA man Pearse Jordan who was shot dead by the RUC in disputed circumstances after a car collision on the Falls Road, Belfast in 1992.

That inquest has also been held up over the release of confidential documents.

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