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Access to report crucial in quest for justice

(Jim Gibney, [Irish News](#))

For most of the last six weeks the London-based media, Britain's national television and the public have been preoccupied with the trial (and verdict) of the Metropolitan Police for the summary execution of a young Brazilian, Jean Charles de Menezes, in July 2005.

Mr de Menezes was an innocent man targeted in a police operation to apprehend suicide bombers who the previous day had failed to detonate four bombs in London's underground. Two weeks prior to the killing of Mr de Menezes suicide bombers had killed 52 people and injured 750 in the underground.

"Catastrophic" was how the jury described the police's failings in the lead up to the killing of Mr de Menezes. The judge found these failings as being "simply beyond explanation".

There was an immediate and sustained call for the resignation of Sir Ian Blair, Britain's top police officer, when the jury found the police guilty of breaking health and safety laws through a litany of decisions which put in danger the lives of those close to the police operation.

It might seem shallow or even insulting, given the controversial circumstances of Mr de Menezes's death, that the verdict was limited to a health and safety law but it was the most serious finding the jury could make.

Indeed, it was incredible that the trial actually took place because the Crown Prosecution Service had decided no individual officer would be held responsible for the shooting – a decision which angered the family and civil liberty groups.

But a trial was needed because the police's reputation had been seriously damaged by the killing.

The only option open to the prosecution service was to put the police service on trial for failing to protect the public. The verdict in this case was in effect a corporate conviction and a serious blow to the Metropolitan Police.

A solicitor for the family said the trial revealed the police followed an "unstoppable shoot-to-kill policy".

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The consequences of this killing for the police have been far-reaching and result from the relentless pressure from many quarters, not least the de Menezes family, to force the police to account for their actions.

At the trial the police tried to defend themselves on the grounds that London was under siege from suicide bombers and that they were operating in dangerous conditions.

While this was true the jury comprehensively rejected it as an excuse for summary execution.

The Belfast-based organisation Relatives for Justice (RFJ) watched the de Menezes trial with great interest.

It has battled for years with the prosecution authorities here on behalf of many families seeking justice who experienced "an unstoppable shoot-to-kill policy" and lost loved ones as a result.

And while RFJ is also disappointed that no police officer would face prosecution for the de Menezes killing it welcomed the public focus the trial received.

This exposure, in a single controversial killing, stands in marked contrast to the secrecy surrounding multiple killings by the Crown forces during the conflict.

Next year RFJ, a group of families and their solicitors will challenge that secrecy which in the case of six families from north Armagh has lasted for 25 years.

These families – Burns, McKerr, Toman, Carroll and Grew – will be joined by the Tighe and Jordan families in the courtroom of the Belfast coroner John Leckey.

Through a reopened inquest into these killings the families are hoping to expose the hidden facts behind the deaths of their loved ones.

They are challenging very powerful forces that have successfully prevented exposure.

Central to the cases of the north Armagh families is public access to the Stalker/Sampson report into these killings. Thus far the British government and the police authorities have refused to hand over this report.

That decision now rests with PSNI chief constable Hugh Orde. He promised a new beginning to policing. This commitment compels him to hand over these reports uncensored.

Also of crucial importance is the willingness of those involved in

the killings to attend the inquest and give evidence.

The coroner now has the power to compel witnesses to attend and is prepared to use it.

Will the vested interests succeed in blocking the truth or will the families – like the de Menezeses – finally uncover the truth?

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