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## Stevens set to testify in 'our gravest libel case'

By Staff Reporter

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Former Metropolitan Police commissioner Lord Stevens, who investigated security force collusion with loyalist killers, is set to give evidence at one of Northern Ireland's biggest ever libel trials.

He is suing the publishers of two Sunday newspapers over allegations linked to Special Branch agent Mark Haddock.

Nineteen other members of his inquiry team have also issued proceedings in response to claims that information was supplied but not acted on.

The High Court in Belfast heard yesterday that a two-week jury trial has been pencilled in for next January.

With debate over which plaintiff should be given lead-case status, their lawyers predicted it would attract major publicity regardless of who was chosen.

"If you take Detective X instead of Lord Stevens, these are [still] glaringly obvious headlines and going to get the same amount of press," David Ringland QC said.

"It is the 'Stevens Inquiry' and Lord Stevens will be giving evidence I'm sure."

The former Scotland Yard chief headed three separate investigations into claims that police officers and soldiers aided loyalist assassination squads.

Haddock, who is currently in custody charged with murdering UDA boss Tommy English, headed the notorious Mount Vernon UVF unit in north Belfast at that time.

Lord Stevens's final report, delivered in April 2003, found that informants and agents were allowed to operate without effective control and to take part in terrorist crimes.

The libel action centres on Sunday World and Sunday Life newspaper reports from 2006 which refer to discussions his detectives allegedly had with two former RUC officers as far back as 1998.

"The major point will be a factual debate between two individuals who were interviewed by members of the Stevens inquiry team," Mr Ringland said.

"The interviewees will apparently say the articles are based upon them saying they communicated the name of a loyalist terrorist to the interviewers and that name was not passed on or acted upon by the Stevens inquiry team."

Lawyers for the newspapers are defending the action on the grounds of justification – claiming the reports were accurate – and a qualified privilege point which relies on an argument that responsible journalism was used.

With the two ex-police officers also set to testify, legal sources predicted that the case would go to trial.

One also described it as potentially the biggest libel action to come before Northern Ireland's High Court in

years because of the gravity of the allegations.

A further review next month is expected to decide the identity of the lead case and whether

separate juries are needed for the litigations against each newspaper.

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