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Army parade opposition hardening stalemate - Robinson

Sinn Fein opposition to a parade for British troops returning from Iraq has damaged efforts to secure political agreement in Northern Ireland, First Minister Peter Robinson claimed today.

The Northern Ireland Executive has not met for four months as a result of a split between republicans and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) over the transfer of policing and justice powers to the Assembly.

Mr Robinson told a Northern Ireland Affairs Committee hearing at Stormont that agreement was made more difficult by Sinn Fein plans to protest at a homecoming parade for troops scheduled for Belfast on Sunday.

Sinn Fein said it will hold a peaceful protest to highlight the impact of British military collusion with loyalist paramilitaries during the Troubles.

But Mr Robinson today said: "I think it is hard for people to envisage how we can devolve powers for policing and justice, when one of the parties in the Assembly behaves in such a reckless way as Sinn Fein are proposing to do.

"And it indicates that there are people certainly within Sinn Fein, who have not pulled themselves into the new era.... who aren't prepared to allow people from our community, who have put their lives in harm's way and thankfully are coming back, and are able to parade in Northern Ireland."

On the wider political front Mr Robinson told the Westminster Committee it was possible the Secretary of State might eventually have to step-in to resolve the dispute between Sinn Fein and the DUP, but he stressed the issues could and should be dealt with by Stormont ministers.

He said the Secretary of State had powers to sanction parties in default of their duties and he also warned that Sinn Fein could yet face a legal challenge if it continued to block Executive meetings.

Mr Robinson repeated his offer to hold an Executive meeting with an open agenda and today added that he would be happy to hold a meeting dealing only with economic issues.

Sinn Fein, meanwhile, has branded the planned homecoming parade a 'catwalk' for the Ministry of Defence.

Republicans have said their demonstration against the march is prompted by opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan where the homecoming troops have served.

But Sinn Fein also objects to the presence of Royal Irish Regiment (RIR) troops, pointing out that the unit is linked to the now defunct Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), elements of which were implicated in collusion with loyalist paramilitaries.

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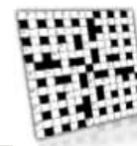
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