# Omagh bomb inquiry to hold initial public hearing



### Omagh Bomb Inquiry to Hold Initial Public Hearing

The public inquiry into the 1998 Omagh bombing, an event widely regarded as the most significant loss of life in a single incident during the Troubles, is set to commence its first hearing on Tuesday 3 October 2023. The preliminary session will take place at the Strule Arts Centre in Omagh, County Tyrone, under the leadership of Chairman Lord Alan Turnbull. This initial day of proceedings is expected to focus on procedural issues and establish the future direction of the inquiry, rather than hearing evidence or calling witnesses.

The Omagh bombing, executed on 15 August 1998 by the Real IRA, resulted in the deaths of 29 individuals, including a pregnant woman expecting twins. The attack occurred in the town's main street during a busy Saturday shopping period, just a few months after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, which marked a major step towards peace in Northern Ireland. The bombing also left more than 200 people injured, affecting not just local residents but also visitors from abroad.

For years, bereaved families and survivors have campaigned vigorously for an independent statutory inquiry into the bombing, alleging significant failures in security and intelligence that prevented the atrocity from being averted. Michael Gallagher, whose son Aiden was among those killed, has been a prominent advocate for the inquiry. He described the wait for the investigation as "an unbelievably long time coming" and referred to the bombing as "the single worst failure of security and intelligence in the history of the state."

The preliminary session is expected to be attended by many of the bereaved families and survivors. It will feature opening remarks from Lord Turnbull and Paul Greaney KC, counsel to the chairman. While evidence and witness testimonies are not scheduled until next year, today's proceedings mark the first time since the incident that all bereaved families, including those from Spain who were caught up in the blast, will convene in one place.

One of the key remits of the inquiry will be to scrutinise whether there were opportunities for UK authorities to have disrupted the dissident activities that led to the bombing. It will also assess the intelligence landscape at the time. However, the inquiry's scope does not extend to identifying the individuals responsible for the attack.

In terms of international cooperation, the Irish government has pledged to assist the inquiry. However, it has rejected calls for a separate or joint public inquiry. This stance has been met with criticism from the South East Fermanagh Foundation (SEFF), an organisation supporting some of the victims. Kenny Donaldson, SEFF's director, expressed disappointment over Dublin's approach. He suggested that the Irish government could enact legislation to empower Lord Turnbull to hold inquiry sessions in Dublin, with the authority to compel witnesses and produce documents. He argued that without the ability to summon witnesses from both sides of the border, the inquiry might not achieve what he sees as an "honourable and just outcome."

Victims' families and advocates, while cautiously optimistic about the inquiry's potential to uncover truths and address long-standing grievances, remain measured in their expectations. Commemorative and personal statements will be a feature of subsequent hearings scheduled for next January, allowing families to voice their experiences and perspectives.

The Omagh bombing, taking place in a newly hopeful post-Good Friday Agreement era, remains a poignant reminder of the lasting impacts of the Troubles on communities in Northern Ireland. The ongoing inquiry seeks to examine and learn from past failures in the hope of preventing future tragedies.

This opening session marks a significant step in a long journey towards accountability and understanding, providing a platform for those affected to share their stories and seek answers they have long sought.