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Tuesday, October 28, 2008

SF parade protest a recipe for disaster, says Robinson

DAN KEENAN, Northern News Editor

FIRST MINISTER Peter Robinson has said that plans for a republican counter-demonstration against a parade by British soldiers from Northern Ireland returning from the Middle East next weekend are "a recipe for disaster".

The DUP leader told a Westminster committee of MPs hearing evidence at Stormont yesterday that the Sinn Féin plan "to bring large numbers of people into the centre of Belfast where undoubtedly there will be thousands of people coming to welcome home our troops is a recipe for disaster".

He said republicans were intent on pushing the British ministry of defence (MoD) into scaling back plans for a homecoming parade to "gain credit within the nationalist community".

"It would be an absolute disaster if the MoD allowed themselves to be bullied by Sinn Féin and those people that they bring on to the streets."

Mr Robinson also told the committee of MPs which oversees Northern Ireland affairs that he would consider approaching Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness in an effort to have the stalled Stormont Executive hold a special meeting to address the needs of the vulnerable who are faced with escalating heating and food bills. Such a meeting would be the first since last June.

The First Minister said republicans' plans to protest at the soldiers' homecoming was helping to undermine unionist confidence which he said was fundamental to the devolution of justice powers, a key Sinn Féin demand.

"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 Féin are proposing to do."

Sinn Féin last night accused Mr Robinson of making excuses for the delay in transferring those powers. South Belfast Assembly member

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Alex Maskey said: "Peter Robinson needs to stop grasping for excuses not to make progress.

"Let's deal with the facts: The DUP is in breach of the St Andrews Agreement on transfer, an agreement which Mr Robinson again acknowledged today his party signed up to.

"There is broad community confidence for this matter to be dealt with now. The DUP's reluctance on this issue has to do with internal party divisions. That's not good enough. Moreover, the Executive can only work on the basis of partnership and equality and thus far there has been little sign of that from the DUP."

The latest controversy marks a further deterioration in the relations between the leading unionist party and Sinn Féin.

The DUP leader was asked if he had discussed the issues with Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams and the Deputy First Minister.

He said he had, insisting that relations between them remained businesslike and cordial.

Asked if Mr McGuinness was aware of his concerns about the planned republican protest against the Royal Irish Regiment homecoming parade, Mr Robinson replied: "I'm not sure that the Deputy First Minister has control over events in West Belfast."

Mr Robinson said he understood the British and Irish governments were reluctant to intervene in the protracted impasse, but added that Northern Secretary Shaun Woodward had powers to sanction parties in default of their duties. He said Sinn Féin 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 to meet Sinn Féin concerns, and deal only with economic issues.

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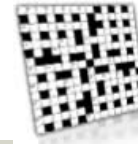


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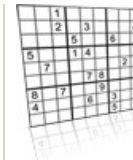
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