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Double agent found murdered in Donegal cottage

Mark Brennock, Chief Political Correspondent, Wed, April 5, 2006

The Irish and British governments have insisted that tomorrow's announcement of plans to try to restore powersharing in the North will go ahead, despite the killing of former senior Sinn Féin member and self-confessed British spy Denis Donaldson.

The IRA denied any involvement in the brutal killing within an hour of the discovery of Mr Donaldson's body at the remote cottage in Co Donegal where he had lived since December. The DUP (*Democratic Unionist Party*) leader the Rev Ian Paisley, however, said a finger of suspicion had to be pointed towards that organisation.



But both Dublin and London were quick to make it clear that neither government was initially pointing the finger at the mainstream republican movement, and that they do not see the killing as providing an obstacle to political development. Spokespeople for Mr Ahern and Mr Blair said the two men would go to Armagh tomorrow morning as planned to announce the restoration of the Northern Assembly for a six-month period in the hope that a powersharing Executive can be established this year.

Minister for Justice Michael McDowell confirmed last night that one of Mr Donaldson's arms had been almost severed at the forearm, and that he had been killed by a gunshot to the head.

He said he did not want to attempt to apportion blame at this stage and asked: "Cui bono? Who would benefit from such an action? Those interested in bringing about political progress would not."

Mr Donaldson (55) was found dead at the cottage where he lived near Glenties yesterday afternoon. He was last seen alive by gardaí on Monday night. He was living there since admitting in December that he had been a British agent within Sinn Féin for 20 years.

Garda forensic experts were examining the area last night, while the State Pathologist was also expected to conduct a postmortem examination.

Mr Donaldson had been Sinn Féin head of administration at Stormont until the arrest of him and others for alleged spying in 2002 brought down the political institutions. He admitted being a spy after the charges against him were dropped, and was expelled from Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams said at the time that Mr Donaldson was under no threat from the republican movement.

Mr Adams condemned the killing but would not speculate on who had carried it out. "It has to be condemned. We are living in a different era, and in the future in which everyone could share. This killing seems to have been carried out by those who have not accepted that."

Saying that the Armagh announcement by Mr Ahern and Mr Blair will go ahead, a spokeswoman for the Taoiseach (*head of government*) said: "The dark world that surrounds this murder is a tragic and regrettable reminder of Northern Ireland's past. The Taoiseach and the British prime minister are determined to bring politics centre stage in Northern Ireland." She said tomorrow's event in Armagh was "about putting the past behind us".

Mr Blair's official spokesman also said the Armagh announcement would go ahead and noted "that Gerry Adams has condemned it totally, dissociating republicans who support the peace process from it. We, needless to say, totally condemn it too." Northern Secretary Peter Hain said he completely condemned "this barbaric act".



An aerial view last night of the house near Glenties, Co Donegal, where the body of Denis Donaldson was found yesterday.

Photograph: James Connolly

Speaking to RTÉ News last night, Sinn Féin's chief negotiator Martin McGuinness said he was "very angry" about the killing and said it was an attack on the peace process. He said that whoever had carried out his killing was "hostile to the concept of peace in Ireland".

Fine Gael leader Enda Kenny said it was a "vicious, cold-blooded murder".