

Britain: Hillsborough disaster families condemn payment to policeman

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Last week, the South Yorkshire Police force agreed to pay out around £330,000 to a policeman who had attended the Hillsborough football disaster in 1989 that left 96 fans dead.

The sum was awarded in an out-of-court settlement to former police sergeant Martin Long, who had been on duty at the Hillsborough football ground on April 15, 1989, when 96 Liverpool Football Club supporters were crushed to death. The tragedy at the stadium's Leppings Lane end, just prior to the FA Cup semi-final fixture in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, was Britain's worst ever sports disaster.

Long, who retired afterwards on medical grounds, is said to have suffered a breakdown following the tragedy and "late-onset post-traumatic stress" disorder nine years later. His compensation case against the South Yorkshire Police was due to be heard at the High Court last week. However an agreement was reached with the force to settle out-of-court. His solicitor said, "Mr Long went into Leppings Lane and was rescuing people. He has suffered from a breakdown as a result of Hillsborough and is still affected by it."

The financial award granted to Long stands in sharp contrast to the treatment of the families who lost their loved ones at Hillsborough; and some of whom have yet to receive a penny.

The Hillsborough Family Support Group condemned the payoff made to Long. Chairman Trevor Hicks, whose two teenage daughters died in the disaster, said the payment was an example of "double standards".

The group's vice-chairman Phil Hammond, whose 14-year-old son was killed at Hillsborough after travelling to watch the game with the Boys' Brigade, called the payment "disgusting". Hammond said, "We all thought too much time had lapsed for claims like that. When you think about the pittance paid to the

families. I'm not saying he didn't suffer, but those police officers were there to do a job. There are people who lost their sons, daughters and loved ones and received nothing. There is a huge difference between the amount paid to the police and the amount paid to survivors."

Phil Hammond received just £3,500 compensation for the death of his son, 100 times less than the payment awarded to Long.

The Assistant Chief Constable of South Yorkshire Police, Ian Daines, said of the settlement, "We are pleased that another chapter of the Hillsborough disaster has now been closed."

Almost 12 years after the event, not a single person has been held responsible before the law for the deaths of the 96 fans. The award to Long is a slap in the face for the survivors and the families of the victims, many of whom say responsibility for the tragedy lay with the police.

Former chief superintendent David Duckenfield—the senior police officer at the ground during the tragedy—was only brought to court as a result of a private prosecution by relatives of the victims. Their prosecution case stated that the police officers in charge of operations that day had wilfully neglected their duty of care when they allowed the Liverpool fans into an already overcrowded area of the ground.

David Duckenfield gave the order to open one of the main concertina gates of the Leppings Lane area of the stadium, which then allowed hundreds of fans to flood onto an already dangerously overcrowded terrace. Those who died began to be crushed just minutes after Duckenfield had called for the gates to be opened.

However, last July, a judge ruled that Duckenfield should not face a retrial for manslaughter. The judge had discharged the jury at the original trial after they

failed to reach a verdict on charges against him. During hearings to decide if there should be a new trial, Duckenfield's counsel argued that there was no realistic prospect of a conviction if a new trial were to take place.

Senior police officer Bernard Murray, the second in command at the Hillsborough stadium on the day of the disaster, was also cleared of manslaughter.



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