

THE ICROSS FILES

How the MoS won

SPECIAL REPORT



From **Michael O'Farrell** IN DUBLIN
and **Barbara Jones** IN NAIROBI



IT WAS, perhaps, ironic that a man who for years allowed himself to be falsely portrayed as a Christian Brother chose Holy Thursday to make his stand.

For that was the day Michael Meegan, 50, decided to take the desperate course of asking the High Court to stop this newspaper publishing a series of devastating allegations against him.

It was the last throw of the dice after two months in which Meegan had refused to answer any questions put to him by the Irish Mail on Sunday, despite mounting allegations from a variety of sources here, in Britain and in Kenya.

His strategy backfired, however: now Meegan's court defeat has been reported around the world, as have details of the string of claims against him. His lawyer was publicly rebuked for misleading the High Court and Meegan will have to pay all the costs of his abortive attempt to silence our investigation. Questions are being asked in parliaments across Europe and his reputation appears to have been shattered.

Yet Meegan's decision to seek to gag the MoS was not just made on a whim. It is the hallmark of a man who, for almost five years, has been fighting to stop the press reporting disturbing claims. Despite having been previously caught lying about his academic qualifications and his religious background – often calling himself 'Brother Meegan' – he and his team of



VOICE OF REASON: High Court President Judge Nicholas Kearns

and even Irish Aid, the Irish taxpayers' body which last year took back €100,000 it had given him.

The truth, in fact, is simply that the concerns about Michael Meegan had become too many and too serious to be ignored, and that, for once, he had met an opponent who was not willing to be cowed by threats.

The MoS investigation began almost two months ago in the last week of February when a source in Ireland expressed concern about the manner in which ICROSS was being run. It quickly emerged that there appeared to be a very real basis for these concerns and after just a couple of days, Barbara Jones – the Mail's distinguished Foreign Correspondent – was dispatched to Kenya.

A mounting dossier of claims had been built up in the six weeks since inquiries into Michael Meegan had begun. It was clear there was a considerable public interest involved if a man in receipt of public and Government donations stood accused of any impropriety whatsoever, never mind the disturbing scale of the allegations being uncovered by the newspaper – all of which are denied by Meegan.

Then, in an extraordinary move on Friday, March 5, Meegan had his Irish solicitor threaten an injunction even before Meegan had been contacted by the MoS. At this stage, the newspaper provided him with a detailed list of the allegations made against him but agreed to withhold publication of the most serious accusations since he was travelling at the time and unavailable for comment.

Instead, on March 7, the MoS ran a front-page story about the fact that the Irish board of ICROSS had repaid almost €100,000 to the Government, frozen its account and taken steps to wind down amid independent and damning audit evidence of financial irregularities and a lack of accountability at the charity.

The following week, an increasingly familiar pattern began to emerge. Although at every stage the MoS pro-

For over five years Michael Meegan has been using legal threats to silence critics and suppress a string of claims about the way he behaves with the young Kenyan men he is meant to be helping. But now the High Court has ruled that we have the right to tell all...



'Demanded police arrest his accusers'

lawyers were able to fend off the tide of concerns raised.

Indeed, when the MoS first invited Meegan to talk to us about these claims, we were met with a hostile response. His lawyers issued a series of legal threats against us and against other witnesses prepared to give evidence against him.

In Kenya, ICROSS went to the local police and demanded his accusers be arrested. In a country where human rights abuses are frequent and the police force has been implicated in mass killings and rapes, this act was a declaration of war on those perceived as trying to bring Meegan down.

For his part, his lawyer said Meegan was entitled to make a complaint of criminal libel and perjury against those he believed had falsely accused him. As the legal letters flew, Meegan insisted he was the victim of a vast international conspiracy: a conspiracy between aid workers with impeccable credentials, internationally respected academics, a member of the British House of Lords – and, of course, a number of Kenyan men.

His enemies also apparently included PricewaterhouseCoopers, which carried out a 2006 audit into the way he was spending charity funds,

vided Meegan with all of the information he requested, he declined to comment or respond on the record whatsoever other than to continue threatening injunctions.

In the meantime, through his lawyers, he set about discrediting many of the witnesses, accusing the African ones of being thieves, liars and cheats spurred on by a supposed 25-year conspiracy against him.

Supporting evidence – damning documentation from his own board, testimony from former board members and other witnesses, and letters in his own handwriting – were all ignored by Meegan.

It was a case of challenging any African witnesses he could and ignoring other evidence. When two former Irish board members gave testimony to the MoS, Meegan's response was not to address the concerns they had

raised – but to issue legal threats against them, too.

The MoS knew if it failed to prove its claims against Meegan in court, it could be liable for huge damages.

'Accused witnesses of being thieves and liars'

Eventually, however, the newspaper made it clear it was happy with the material it had gathered and that it planned to publish an article on April 3. As it had done from the start, it informed Meegan of what it planned to report so he could give a proper response.

This time, Meegan carried out his threat to try for an injunction. On the morning of April

1, his Dublin-based lawyer went before Judge John Edwards to ask for an emergency injunction against the MoS. As soon as the MoS was told of the application, it went to court, seeking an urgent hearing of the case but, in the event, the matter was put on hold until after Easter.

The Holy Thursday application was a tactic that had proven successful for Meegan against other newspapers in the past. However, senior executives at the MoS – including the editors and managing director – decided to support those who had cooperated with the newspaper's investigation in Kenya and its duty to publish.