Video link to Bulger murder disputed

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AS ACCUSATIONS over the role of horror videos in violent crime mounted yesterday, senior Merseyside police discounted suggestions that they had influenced the murder of James Bulger.

Despite strong pressure from MPs for action, the Home Office responded cautiously to the statement by the James Bulger trial judge, Mr Justice Morland, that exposure to violent videos might have encouraged the actions of Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, the 11-year-olds jailed for the murder.

David Maclean, Minister of State at the Home Office, said the judge's comments would be closely studied but police had found no evidence linking the case with 'video nasties'. Britain had the tightest European laws on videos: 'We cannot see any other way we can make the laws any tighter ... no matter how tightly Parliament may classify films, what you watch in your own home as viewers is the decision of parents and youngsters.'

But Mr Maclean fuelled the debate over juvenile crime by saying that churches had been 'strangely silent' over the issues of right and wrong. His comments were strongly rejected by church leaders.

Yesterday, the solicitor for Neil Venables, father of Jon Venables, denied the boy had watched an 18- certificate film his father had rented a month before. Child's Play 3 contains scenes in which an obsessed doll, Chucky, dies after being splattered with paint and having its face pulped; James Bulger was splashed with paint and battered to death.

British Sky Broadcasting yesterday cancelled a 10pm screening of the film tonight; it has shown the film twice recently.

David Alton, Liberal Democrat MP for the Merseyside seat of Mossley Hill, who has tabled a Commons motion calling for more control over violent material, welcomed the decision to stop the screening: 'It is crucial that the nation searches its soul and asks how this kind of crime can happen.'

In the Commons, the Conservative MP Sir Ivan Lawrence QC called for action to curb 'the constant diet of violence and depravity' fed to youngsters through television, videos and computer pornography. Sir Ivan, chairman of the Home Affairs Select Committee, said it was becoming 'daily more obvious' that this was a major reason for the rise in juvenile crime.

The video furor surprised Merseyside senior detectives. One said: 'I don't know where the judge got that idea from. I couldn't believe it when I heard him.

'We went through something like 200 titles rented by the Venables family. There were some you or I wouldn't want to see, but nothing - no scene, or plot, or dialogue - where you could put your finger on the freeze button and say that influenced a boy to go out and commit murder.'

Police were also told that a Roald Dahl story, 'The Swan', available in Liverpool schools and libraries, foretold the death. In the story, two bullies abduct a younger child and drag him to a railway embankment where a train almost kills him and he is threatened with drowning. He eventually flies to safety.