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Bid to clear RUC men of collusion claims

The government in Northern Ireland has moved to clear the names of three former senior policemen who the Police Ombudsman wanted to question about collusion with loyalists.

Security Minister Paul Goggins paid tribute to Royal Ulster Constabulary officers Chris Albiston, Freddie Hall and Raymond White in Westminster.

The ex-Special Branch heads were to be interviewed by Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan about processes within the secretive agent-handling unit as part of her investigation into 10 north Belfast murders linked to a security force mole.

In a written answer to Democratic Unionist MP Jeffrey Donaldson this week, Mr Goggins said: "The three former senior officers, Chris Albiston, Raymond White and Freddie Hall, named by the Right Hon Gentleman were not formally interviewed in connection with any alleged offence in the course of the Police Ombudsman's investigation.

"I am happy to put on record that these officers, in common with many colleagues, served with commitment and distinction in very demanding policing roles in Northern Ireland."

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Mrs O`Loan published a critical report in January about alleged RUC Special Branch links to north Belfast killings by the Ulster Volunteer Force.

Agent Mark Haddock was said to be involved in crimes including the death of Raymond McCord, 22, a former RAF worker beaten to death and dumped in a quarry by the loyalist gang in November 1997.

The Ombudsman said her investigation had revealed a network of informers allowed to operate with impunity.

Retired officers have challenged the validity of her findings and said there was no evidence to back them up.

She has countered that they refused to co-operate with her inquiry.

Mr Albiston has launched a libel action after nationalist SDLP leader Mark Durkan published an advert which said it had prevented the RUC "old guard" from being promoted to head the new police service in 2002.

The SDLP has said it did not intend to connect any candidate in the competition, won by current Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde, to collusion.

Both Mr Albiston and Alan McQuillan, now of the Assets Recovery Agency, served in the RUC but were beaten to the top post by Sir Hugh, then of Scotland Yard.

Mr Donaldson said: "I believe that Paul Goggins` response exonerates the three men and recognises the professionalism of Chris Albiston, Freddie Hall and Raymond White based on their service in the RUC and particularly their role as head of Special Branch.

"These men helped save countless lives in Northern Ireland and it`s only right that the Government should recognise the service and also make clear that these three men were not questioned about or suspected of involvement in anything that would have given rise to concern in terms of the issues covered in the recent report by the Ombudsman."

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STARRING: Maggie Gyllenhaal, Giancarlo Esposito, Brad William Henke, Ryan Simpkins.

DETAILS: US / 96mins (16)

RATING: ★★☆☆☆

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