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O'Loan report provides new shocks

Monday, January 22, 2007

By David Gordon, Investigations Correspondent

Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan today blamed the high command of the RUC and PSNI for collusion between Special Branch officers and a gang of UVF serial killers.

Prime Minister Tony Blair today described Mrs O'Loan's report as deeply disturbing, while Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde offered a "whole-hearted apology" to victims' families.

The Ombudsman concluded that "certain officers" in the Branch had protected informers in the Mount Vernon UVF, despite their repeated involvement in murder and other paramilitary crimes.

Today's long-awaited report - unveiled at a packed press conference at a Belfast hotel - is even more hard-hitting than expected, with a series of highly damaging findings.

No past or serving officers are facing prosecution as a result of the probe, but the Government will have to respond to growing calls for a public inquiry.

Raymond McCord, the campaigning father who initiated the investigation, today urged Sinn Fein not to sign up to policing until inquiry demands are met.

Among the most shocking conclusions by Mrs O'Loan were:

- It is estimated that Mount Vernon UVF chief Mark Haddock was paid at least £79,840 as a police informer between 1991 and 2003. A number of his UVF associates were also informers. During this same period, reliable security force intelligence linked Haddock and his cohorts to 10 murders, plus 72 other crimes including 10 attempted murders, drug dealing and a bomb attack in the Republic;
- Haddock's monthly retainer was increased from £100 to £160 in 1993, shortly after he had been identified as the main suspect in the murder of Catholic woman Sharon McKenna.
- The disappearance of key police records has "prevented senior officers from being held to account". Mrs O'Loan stated that a number of documents, including parts of murder files, decision logs and intelligence documents, were found to be either missing, lost or destroyed. She said this was due to a "deliberate strategy" rather than an oversight.
- Vital intelligence about murders and other serious crimes involving Mount Vernon UVF was withheld by Special Branch officers from detectives investigating the cases.
- Searches for UVF arms were blocked by Special Branch for no valid reason;
- Misleading information was prepared for the Director of Public Prosecutions;
- Haddock was reportedly "babysat" through police interviews to ensure he did not incriminate himself;
- False notes on interviews were created by officers;
- Intelligence linking police informers - including Haddock - to a 1997 bomb attack on a Sinn Fein office in Monaghan was not passed to the Garda.

Mrs O'Loan stated: "It would be easy to blame the junior officers' conduct in dealing with various informants and indeed they are not blameless.

"However, they could not have operated as they did without the knowledge and support at the highest levels of the RUC and the PSNI."

The Chief Constable described the findings as "shocking", while highlighting the changes in handling informers that have since been introduced.

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Sir Hugh offered "a whole-hearted apology for anything done or left undone".

He also continued working for the force for several months after the Ombudsman launched her investigation.

The loyalist survived a UVF murder bid last year, after being exposed as a Special Branch agent.

He is currently serving a 10-year jail sentence for a vicious assault on a Newtownabbey pub doorman. It was committed in December 2002 - when Haddock was still a Special Branch agent.

Mrs O'Loan today said: "I am satisfied that the PSNI has accepted the mistakes of the past and put in place policies and procedures to help ensure they will not happen in the future."

The force has had three chief constables over the period covered by the report: Sir Hugh Annesley, Sir Ronnie Flanagan, Sir Hugh Orde and an acting chief constable, the late Colin Cramphorn.

A group of ex-Special Branch officers at the centre of the case have denounced the Ombudsman's probe and insisted that they acted "in the best interests of the pursuit of justice".

The published report does not name Haddock, referring to him as "Informant 1".

The man who exposed the Mount Vernon UVF informers today slammed the lack of prosecutions.

Raymond McCord said Mrs O'Loan had vindicated his long campaign about the 1997 murder of his son, Raymond Jnr.

"As a Protestant, I am asking Sinn Fein not to sign up to policing until this is sorted out through a public inquiry," he told the Belfast Telegraph.

"The cover-ups are continuing. Mrs O'Loan and her team have done their best and my family will always be very grateful to them. But vital documents have gone missing, stopping people from being held to account.

"If the authorities think this is the end of the matter, they are badly mistaken."

He first took his concerns to the Ombudsman in 2002, alleging that his son had been beaten to death on Haddock's orders.

Mrs O'Loan's report confirmed that the loyalist was a prime suspect in the killing. It also highlighted a number of flaws in the murder probe which reduced the chances of anyone being prosecuted.

The investigation was the most complex ever undertaken by the Ombudsman's office. Over 100 serving and retired officers were interviewed, 24 of them under caution.

Mrs O'Loan today said: "This has been a difficult and at times very sad investigation, both to conduct and to report on."

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