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Former RUC chief Flanagan 'unaware' of Special Branch files on solicitor Rosemary Nelson

Tuesday, 20 January 2009

Former RUC chief constable Sir Ronnie Flanagan was unaware that his Special Branch officers kept files on solicitor Rosemary Nelson, the public inquiry into her murder has heard.

The former Northern Ireland police chief was giving evidence to the inquiry into the murder of the 40-year-old, who died in a loyalist bomb attack in 1999 amid allegations of security force collusion.

But in the first of three days of evidence the former Chief Constable of the then Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) denied describing Mrs Nelson as an "immoral woman", and challenged the evidence of other security force witnesses who controversially claimed she was helping IRA killers cover their tracks.

Sir Ronnie gave a statement to the probe noting that he did not believe files were kept on the solicitor, but yesterday he said he was surprised to hear the existence of such documents had been detected by the inquiry.

Yesterday's proceedings opened with a review of Sir Ronnie's career, characterising him as an innovative officer who had a 'hands-on' leadership style and who encouraged greater openness.

But Sir Ronnie later went on to tell the inquiry he was not privy to a series of allegations linked to Mrs Nelson's case.

Sir Ronnie told lead counsel Rory Phillips QC that:

- He did not know his Special Branch officers kept files on Mrs Nelson;
- Did not recall being told a US Senator wrote to British officials claiming Mrs Nelson's life was threatened by an RUC officer;
- Was not briefed on the claims of other officers that Mrs Nelson was having an affair with an IRA member;
- Did not know security force documents claimed Mrs Nelson was trying to influence a witness in an IRA murder case.

Sir Ronnie said in his statement to the inquiry, read out during yesterday's hearing: "I am not aware of any files, paper or otherwise, that have been kept on Mrs Nelson. My impression at the time was that Rosemary Nelson was a lawyer who was doing her job," he said.

Mr Phillips told Sir Ronnie that evidence gathered by the inquiry had shown that Mrs Nelson had a Special Branch number, signifying the existence of files on her.

On the issue of files being kept on Mrs Nelson, Sir Ronnie replied: "I would have been surprised that there would."

He added: "I had no personal reason to understand ... that there would be any material that would make appropriate the creation of such a file."

Sir Ronnie said he had become aware of the existence of such files only after recently reviewing evidence already given to the inquiry.

The inquiry heard he joined the force in May 1970, holding a series of senior positions, including head of Special Branch, before taking over leadership of the RUC in 1996.

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