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Orde defends cold case team after international criticism

By Chris Thornton

07 November 2006

PSNI Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde has defended the team reviewing Troubles murders after a report questioned whether they would be able to resolve concerns about collusion.

The international panel that produced the report, which looks at loyalist collusion in 74 murders in the 1970s, indicated that the PSNI's Historical Enquiries Team (HET) review of individual cases seems unlikely to connect the dots that could establish if collusion was systematic. They also said the team does not meet UN standards because its findings will not be made public.

Sir Hugh said he has long believed a "wider process" is needed, but pointed out that the HET is "the only piece of concrete work that is ongoing in relation to these issues".

The report, launched in Belfast yesterday, looks at a series of killings in the Armagh-Tyrone border area, many of them linked by forensic evidence.

Ballistic and witness evidence suggests members of the security forces were involved in the murders.

In one case, four RUC officers - at least one on duty - were convicted of a gun attack on the Rock Bar, near Keady, Co Armagh, in 1976. Only one received a jail term.

Guns used in that incident were used in a number of other attacks, including murders.

The only man wounded in that attack, 84-year-old Mick McGrath, backed the report at yesterday's launch. A bullet from the attack is still lodged inside him. "I was lucky I recovered," he said.

Professor Douglass Cassel, the law professor from Notre Dame Law School in the US who headed up the panel, said the Government should institute an investigation that gets at the "full depth and full breadth and height of collusion", including how much senior officers and officials knew.

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"There's enough evidence, easily accessible in the public domain, to reach the conclusion that we reached - that there was substantial collusion," Professor Cassel said.

"But there is a great deal that we haven't seen. There is a great deal more that should be done but we are not suggesting that it is the Historic (sic) Enquiries Team that should do the digging.

"The Historic Enquiries Team by itself, in our judgment, is not a sufficient vehicle to get to the truth."

But Sir Hugh said the team would look at every case "thoroughly, impartially and professionally and where there are grounds for further investigation and prosecution, appropriate action will be taken".

"I have said from the very beginning that the Historical Enquiries Team is only one part of the solution to the difficult and sensitive issues around Northern Ireland's recent history," he said.

"I believe that a wider debate has to happen and a wider process is needed; however, so far this team is the only piece of concrete work that is ongoing in relation to these issues and whilst I do not say it is the answer to every question, it offers real answers to many, many, families who are deciding to engage with it.

"This particular panel did not meet with or consult directly with the Historical Enquiries Team. I would invite them to come and see for themselves how the investigations and work with the families are progressing."

Alan Brecknell, whose father was killed in one of the attacks, said many families want the truth about what happened.

"It's not about revenge," he said. "It's about a meaningful way of addressing the past."

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