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**Special report**  
Northern Ireland

## Junior officers 'supported at highest levels of RUC and PSNI'

Owen Bowcott

Tuesday January 23, 2007

[The Guardian](#)

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Throughout the Troubles special branch was derided by republicans as a "force within a force", a secret unit following its own agenda independent of the rest of the police service.

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Nuala O'Loan's report of its practices appears to confirm some of those suspicions and again raises the question of how far up the chain of command responsibility for its actions should lie.

Forty serving and former officers declined to cooperate with her three- and-a-half year inquiry, including two retired assistant chief constables, seven detective chief superintendents and two detective superintendents.

"The majority of them failed even to reply" for requests for interviews, Ms O'Loan noted. Some did help but "others, including serving officers, gave evasive, contradictory, and on occasion farcical answers to questions", she said.

"On occasion those answers indicated either a significant failure to understand the law or contempt for the law. On other occasions the investigation demonstrated conclusively that what an officer had told the police ombudsman's investigators was completely untrue."

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Assessing who was responsible for the collusion between special branch officers and the UVF unit, she said: "It would be easy to blame junior officers' conduct in dealing with various informants and indeed they are not blameless.

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

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Ms O'Loan also criticised the way in which special branch records were routinely destroyed in defiance of national guidelines on the handling of agents.

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Despite a decision by the director of public prosecutions that no officers should be charged, human rights groups and relatives of victims yesterday called for action against past officers, in particular Sir Ronnie Flanagan, a former head of special branch who was the RUC's chief constable at the time of the McCord killing.

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Sir Ronnie, currently Her Majesty's chief inspector of police, had cooperated with the inquiry, Ms O'Loan said.

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Raymond McCord, whose son was murdered by the UVF, called for Sir Ronnie to be removed from his post and stripped of his knighthood.

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Relatives For Justice, a group representing victims' families, said it was considering taking a private prosecution against him.

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The Home Office, which answers on behalf of the inspectorate, said yesterday that Sir Ronnie would not respond to the report.

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Lawyers for other unnamed, former RUC officers put out a statement in advance of the report's publication saying they "vigorously refute [Ms O'Loan's] allegations as unfounded and incapable of substantiation".

The Northern Ireland Retired Police Officers' Association told the BBC their members had always acted in the best interests of the pursuit of justice and had nothing to be

ashamed of.

Sir Hugh Orde, chief constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, said systems were in place to ensure the same problem would never recur, and apologised for "anything done or left undone".

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