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## More Ulster collusion fears as new cases uncovered

**Owen Bowcott**

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Detectives re-examining thousands of deaths and murders in Northern Ireland's Troubles have uncovered two more cases of killings that have triggered suspicions of collusion between the security forces and paramilitary groups.

The cases, from the early 1970s, are being investigated by dedicated groups of officers from the Police Service of Northern Ireland's historical enquiries team (HET).

Allegations of collusion, particularly with loyalist paramilitaries, cast a long shadow over the record of the security forces and military intelligence during the Troubles. Among the most prominent controversies were the 1989 murder of the Belfast lawyer Pat Finucane and the killing 10 years later of the Lurgan solicitor Rosemary Nelson.

The HET was created in 2005 by Sir Hugh Orde, chief constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, with the challenging aim of re-examining all 3,268 deaths and murders related to the Troubles between 1969 and 1998.

Its intention is to provide answers, or some form of resolution, for bereaved families. Detectives are now focusing in on key issues and patterns of murder.

Despite the emergence of fresh concerns about the behaviour of the security forces, the team's deputy director, Phil James, insisted the work was not about "pointing fingers" at the police or army. He declined to reveal specific details about either of the newly uncovered cases or how many murders were involved.

But he told the Guardian that officers were checking old forensic evidence. "If we think there's a realistic chance of a case," he said, "if [the material has been] kept in a an appropriate way with the labels signed, even if it's 40 years old we will try."

Around 20 groups of cases have become the focus of detailed studies as the HET works its way through its process of cold case reviews.

Among subjects receiving specific attention for which a Senior Investigating Officer has been appointed to coordinate related cases are:

- Murders committed by the Ulster Volunteer Force's 'Glenanne gang' in the mid-1970s. As many as 87 deaths – including bombings in Dublin and Monaghan - have been linked to this paramilitary unit which allegedly included past and serving members of the RUC and Ulster Defence Regiment.
- Scores of self-styled 'executions' carried out by the IRA's internal security and punishment squads. The exposure of one of the so-called 'Nutting Squad's' leaders as the

military intelligence agent 'Stakeknife' has raised questions about who directed the killings.

- The activities of loyalist paramilitary killers who were also Special Branch informants. This inquiry has been called Operation Stafford and has grown out of the Police Ombudsman's inquiry last year into the 1997 murder by the Ulster Volunteer Force of Raymond McCord in north Belfast.

As well as examining the state's alleged role, detectives are focusing on aspects of the IRA's campaigns:

- The Provisionals' use of 'proxy' or 'human bombs' where kidnap victims were forced to drive devices into army checkpoints: five soldiers and a civilian worker were killed at the Coshquin border post in 1990.
- Shootings by the vigilante organisation Direct Action Against Drugs that killed as many as 11 supposed drug dealers during the 1990s. The IRA always denied that DAAD was a cover name for its gunmen.

Several of these groupings are being handled by the HET's 'White Team' which specialises in collusion cases. Its officers, some with experience of war crimes inquiries in Bosnia, are from forces other than the RUC or PSNI. A number of its detectives operate out of a London office and have taken over responsibility for the residue of cases investigated by Lord Stevens in the last of his three enquiries. Lord Stevens retains oversight of his inquiries.

After three years' work, detectives are now re-opening cases from 1973/4 and are around a third of the way through total fatalities. Phil James admitted that the original schedule of reviewing every Troubles killing by 2011 would not be met. "It will take a few more years than that," he said, "probably two years".

The process could be complicated if responsibility for the task is transferred from the PSNI to a new truth and reconciliation-style commission examining the legacy of the past. A report by the former Church of Ireland archbishop, Lord Robin Eames and Denis Bradley, is expected soon.

Phil James is confident the Historical Enquiries Team's work will continue. "We believe the HET is independent. If [any new commission] delivered confidence around enhanced independence, but we didn't lose access to the materials we have, I could sit comfortably with that," he said.

James insists he has been given access to any documents and information he has requested: "We have sought information about agents and informers ... If [agents] have been inappropriately used we will investigate. If someone is acting correctly within the law they are entitled [to] protection. But if they were engaged in significant criminality there's no protection for them."

HET detectives have interviewed former members of the security forces, witnesses and suspects. They have carried out test-firings on weapons and commissioned forensic tests.

Asked whether they had approached any politicians, James said: "As we go forward there may be cases when we will consider that. We will go where the evidence takes us. If the evidence is there we will do it."

Republican groups have pressed the HET to search for evidence, in particular, of what they believe was high-level security force collusion in killings associated with the UVF's

Glenanne gang in the mid-1970s. Several RUC officers were subsequently convicted of participation in gun and bomb attacks.

James said: "The first examinations of a number of Glenanne cases are complete and work is now ongoing with a holistic approach, examining allegations of collusion and at what level."

Much of the HET's work involves liaising with families of the bereaved. Some welcome the re-opening of cases, others do not want painful memories revived.

"Sometimes families split into factions: some grateful, some resentful [of our findings]," James said. "Some change their minds. Some families want to forget."

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