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**Special
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Northern
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Investigation could reveal hand behind four Ulster murders

MI5 and MoD try to recover secret documents before public hearings

Sandra Laville, crime correspondent

Tuesday April 10, 2007

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Billy Wright in 1997, nine months before his murder. Photograph: Press Association

Over the next 12 months four crucial inquiries are expected to lift the lid on the extent of security force collusion with paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. But just weeks before the first public hearing, the Guardian has learned that both MI5 and the Ministry of Defence are among government agencies involved in a desperate race to recover secret documents handed to the original Stevens inquiry.

Sources within the inquiry team, set up 18 years ago to

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investigate collusion by the security forces in Northern Ireland, say the pressure upon them to return confidential documents is growing before the inquiry into the murder of the loyalist terrorist Billy Wright starts on May 30.

The four public inquiries are:

Billy Wright

The hardline leader of the outlawed Loyalist Volunteer Force, Wright was ambushed by the nationalist Irish National Liberation Army in the Maze prison on December 27 1997. He was shot three times by an INLA team led by Christopher "Crip" McWilliams, and died at the scene.

The killing, within a high security prison where republicans and loyalists were segregated, raised questions about whether the authorities colluded with the INLA to have Wright murdered because he was a danger to the emerging peace process - Wright had opposed the ceasefire ordered by the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1994 and formed the breakaway LVF.

Wright's father campaigned for a public inquiry into his son's murder. The killing was investigated by the collusion inquiry carried out by the retired Canadian supreme court judge Peter Cory and it was recommended that the UK government launch an inquiry.

A public inquiry was announced by the then secretary of state for Northern Ireland, Paul Murphy, in November 2004, and changed by Peter Hain, the current secretary of state, into an inquiry to be held under the Inquiries Act 2005. Its remit is: "To inquire into the death of Billy Wright with a view to determining whether any wrongful act or omission by or within the prison authorities or other state agencies facilitated his death, or whether attempts were made to do so; whether any such act or omission was intentional or negligent; and to make recommendations."

Full hearings are due to start in May.

Patrick Finucane

In May 1999 Lord Stevens was asked to reinvestigate the murder of Patrick Finucane, 39, who was killed in front of his wife and children on Sunday February 12 1989. Finucane, who worked as a solicitor in Belfast primarily representing nationalist clients, was shot 14 times by two masked men who entered his house in the early evening. The gunmen escaped in a car. The murder was claimed the next day by the Ulster Freedom Fighters. One of the firearms used was found to be from a gun cache stolen in 1987 from an Ulster Defence Regiment barracks. By November 1989 the murder remained unsolved.

In 1990 a journalist, Neil Mulholland, came forward with information from a man called William Stobie, who claimed to be a quartermaster for the loyalist terror group the UDA and an agent of the RUC special branch.

It was established that Stobie had supplied information to the RUC of a murder being planned. He also gave information after the killing which never reached the murder team. Stobie was arrested and charged with the murder following the Stevens investigation, but the trial collapsed when Mulholland failed to give evidence because of his mental state. Two weeks later Stobie was shot dead by the loyalist terror group the Red Hand Defenders.

The Stevens inquiry also reviewed the role of army agent Brian Nelson. He is said to have passed Finucane's picture to another person to identify him as a target. Nelson has since died.

Rosemary Nelson

Rosemary Nelson, a solicitor who represented men accused of terrorist crimes, was murdered as she drove away from her house in Lurgan on March 15 1999. She had spoken of personal threats. Allegations of collusion were made within hours of her death. On the basis of investigations carried out by Peter Cory, it was recommended there should be a public inquiry.

The terms of reference are to: inquire into the death of Rosemary Nelson "with a view to determining whether any

wrongful act or omission by or within the Royal Ulster Constabulary, Northern Ireland Office, army or other state agency facilitated her death or obstructed the investigation of it, or whether attempts were made to do so; whether any such act or omission was intentional or negligent". Hearings are due to start in September.

Robert Hamill

Robert Hamill, a 25-year-old Catholic, died in hospital after being attacked by a loyalist mob in Portadown in 1997. Armed Royal Ulster Constabulary officers were stationed in a Land Rover near the scene but allegedly failed to intervene. The inquiry into Hamill's death was announced in November 2004 by Mr Murphy. He said the terms of reference were to inquire into the death of Hamill with a view to determining whether any wrongful act or omission by or within the RUC facilitated his death or obstructed the investigation of it, or whether attempts were made to do so; whether any such act or omission was intentional or negligent; whether the investigation of his death was carried out with due diligence; and to make recommendations.

The inquiry remains adjourned pending a legal battle over whether RUC officers can give evidence anonymously.

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