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Northern
Ireland**

The ombudsman's report

Devastating findings highlighted police failures

David Pallister
Friday December 21, 2007
[The Guardian](#)

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Newspaper front pages the day after Omagh. Photograph: AP

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Few independent reports into the police conduct of a murder inquiry were as devastating as Nuala O'Loan's investigation into Omagh, published in 2001. The then police ombudsman had no hesitation in assigning blame. "This report is about a failure of leadership," she concluded. "The victims, their families and officers of the RUC have been let down by defective leadership, poor judgment and a lack of urgency."

The leader she referred to was the chief constable Ronnie Flanagan who was so affronted by her stinging criticisms

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that he threatened to kill himself if they turned out to be true.

The Police Association for Northern Ireland launched a judicial review to have the report quashed and O'Loan was subjected to a torrent of personal abuse. One Unionist MP called her "a rescue brigade for the terrorists" and, after the RUC's complaints, the former Northern Ireland secretary, Peter Mandelson, accused her of "a certain lack of experience and possibly some gullibility".

But two years later, in January 2003, the legal challenge was withdrawn. "I am very pleased that my report stands," she said.

By that time Flanagan had been made Sir Ronnie, as well as receiving a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire (GBE). And he went on to higher things: he is currently HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary.

Her report, published three years after the atrocity in December 2001, was prompted by a story earlier in the year in the Sunday People. Under the headline "I told cops about Omagh", a former police CID informant, Kevin Fulton, said he had warned the RUC three days before the bombing that dissident terrorists with the Real IRA were planning an unspecified bombing action. He named two people, one a known activist. O'Loan discovered his warning had been passed to the special branch but the record of his meeting was lost and the branch denied receiving the information.

There was another, more specific, warning 11 days before the attack in an anonymous telephone call to a detective in Omagh. The caller identified the exact day of the bombing - August 15 - and named four people. The detective thought his information was genuine. But special branch dismissed two of the named men as mere "smugglers" and failed to pass on the intelligence to the local Omagh commander.

O'Loan said it was unlikely the bombing could have been thwarted on Fulton's warning alone, but she added: "It will never be known whether or not the bombing of Omagh

could have been prevented if the RUC had taken more action in relation to the information it received ... between August 4 and 15 1998."

Her report about the conduct of the initial police investigation relied heavily on an internal RUC review which found "significant and fundamental errors".

There were, she concluded, "many failures in the management and leadership" of the investigation. She found that neither the inquiry's senior investigating officer nor his deputy were on the inquiry full-time, resources were cut after two months, and there were "considerable errors in the management of the investigative computer database".

The bomb car went missing and was found rusting in a car park covered with a tarpaulin. There were delays of up to a year between taking statements and following up leads.

O'Loan found the RUC unhelpful. She wrote: "It is of considerable concern that some critical information was not provided to ombudsman investigators", and that "at senior management level the response to the inquiry has been defensive and at times uncooperative".

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