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## British intelligence chief quizzed

By Staff Reporter

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The head of British intelligence in Northern Ireland is among a string of senior security officials to have been quizzed by the inquiry into the loyalist murder of solicitor Rosemary Nelson, it was revealed yesterday.

As the public inquiry held its first hearings in Belfast details were released of the work that has already gone on

behind the scenes in the investigation into the death in March 1999.

The inquiry revealed the list of top security-force officials it has interviewed as it investigates allegations that the authorities may have had a role in Mrs Nelson's murder.

Rory Phillips QC, counsel for the inquiry, said witness statements had been taken from:

- 30 police officers up to the rank of assistant chief constable
- 19 MI5 intelligence officers
- eight top army intelligence officers.

Mr Phillips revealed the list included the director and coordinator of intelligence in Northern Ireland, the head of Special Branch and intelligence officers from across the security forces involved in handling agents.

Mrs Nelson had alleged police harassment prior to her death and Mr Phillips began proceedings with an opening statement detailing the task to be carried out by the three-member inquiry panel.

"On your behalf it will be our task over the months of these hearings to investigate and probe these and other matters which include very troubling suggestions – at their highest of state involvement in the murder of one of the state's own citizens – in a dispassionate and calm way so that the truth is not itself obscured by emotion, preconception or prejudice," he said.

Mrs Nelson's husband Paul, her mother and her brothers and sisters were present for the opening day of the inquiry in the Interpoint Centre in central Belfast.

They sat behind the rows of lawyers representing parties to the inquiry, including representatives of the RUC, NIO, British army and intelligence service MI5.

The inquiry follows a lengthy police investigation which failed to convict anyone in connection with Mrs Nelson's murder.

The 40-year-old lawyer was killed in a car bomb at her home in Lurgan, Co Armagh, on March 15 1999. The loyalist paramilitary group the Red Hand Defenders admitted responsibility.

Prior to her death Mrs Nelson came to prominence for representing a group of high-profile republican and nationalist clients including the Cath-olic Garvaghy Road Residents' Group which opposed Orange Order parades at Drumcree.

Her work brought her into contact with senior politicians and public figures and the inquiry yesterday confirmed that Jonathan Powell, chief of staff to the then prime minister, Tony Blair, had also given a

statement.

Mrs Nelson had told representatives of the US Congress and the United Nations that her life was being threatened by RUC officers and loyalist paramilitaries. Although the allegations were denied by police, the claims fuelled speculation of a wider conspiracy against her.

More than £15 million has so far been spent on the Nelson case but

Mr Phillips told the inquiry that the failure to catch her killers continued to cause controversy.

“At the time of her murder there was a perception, that has persisted to this day, that she was killed for her work,” Mr Phillips said.

However, Mr Phillips continued: “An important characteristic of a free democratic society governed according to law is the presence within it of lawyers who are willing and able to take up the cause of those charged with offences, however grave they may be and however repellent the nature of the conduct alleged and to represent them fearlessly and to the best of their ability, whatever society’s view of their clients.”

Mr Phillips said Mrs Nelson’s murder was one of more than 3,000 committed during the Troubles.

He drew comparisons with the loyalist killing in 1989 of solicitor Pat Finucane, which also stirred allegations of security-force collusion.

Mr Phillips said Mrs Nelson’s allegations of threats prior to her death and their airing on the world stage had set her case apart.

“Suffice to say at this point that the striking and possibly unique feature of her murder was that the fact of it, if not the manner of it, had apparently been so clearly foreshadowed, not least by her,” he said.

“Unsurprisingly therefore after her murder there were many who want-

ed to know whether more could

have been done to protect her and whether her murder could have been prevented.

“Importantly, however, the theories, the claims and counter claims which have surrounded the murder have had no public airing until now.”

Mrs Nelson’s brother Eunan Magee said his family now hoped the truth would emerge.

“The inquiry will be a difficult process for the family but there is some relief that this day has finally arrived,” he said.

“We just hope that the truth will come out at the end. We have nothing to fear from the truth and everyone can then make their own judgement on what happened to Rosemary.”

The inquiry is being led by a panel of three officials chaired by retired High Court judge Sir Michael Morland.


His colleagues are Dame Valerie Strachan, former chair of the Board of Customs and Excise, and Sir Anthony Burden, former chief constable of South Wales Police.

Mr Phillips's opening statement on the case is expected to last at least three days.

The first witnesses are expected to appear at the inquiry by the end of the month.

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