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Omagh phone evidence 'was shared with RUC'

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FRANK MILLAR, London Editor

AN OFFICIAL inquiry has rejected claims that GCHQ failed to pass on vital telephone-intercept evidence promptly enough to either prevent the Omagh bombing or subsequently assist the police to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Sir Peter Gibson, the UK's intelligence services commissioner, has found that in the days surrounding the bombing on August 15th, 1998, "to the extent that any relevant intelligence was derived from interception" it was shared with the RUC and special branch "promptly and fully" and in accordance with agreed procedures.

That conclusion is supported by Sir Hugh Orde, chief constable of the successor Police Service of Northern Ireland, in a letter to secretary of state Shaun Woodward, in which he "strongly" endorses Sir Peter's view that none of the information concerned could have prevented the atrocity.

A total of 29 men, women and children and two unborn babies were killed, some 250 others hospitalised and hundreds more injured in Omagh when the Real IRA detonated a 500lb bomb in the worst terrorist incident of the Troubles.

The claim that intelligence officers at GCHQ, the British government's "listening" centre, held back potentially vital information was made in a BBC Panorama programme last September. This prompted British prime minister Gordon Brown to ask Sir Peter to "review any intercepted intelligence material available to the security and intelligence agencies" in relation to the bombing "and how this intelligence was shared".

Sir Peter presented his report to Mr Brown on December 18th, and a summary of it – consistent with legal constraints and national security requirements – was published yesterday by Mr Woodward in a written parliamentary statement.

Sir Peter acknowledges the "serious and damaging" nature of the allegations made, "as a result of which expectations may have been raised among the families of the victims of the bombing".

He also records "the acute distress of the police on duty at the time" at realising that – as a result of "the inaccurate information" given in bomb warning calls – they found that in clearing the area around the local courthouse (referred to in the calls) "they had moved some victims into the area of the blast".

In his key finding, Sir Peter says: "I am satisfied that in the days surrounding August 15th, and on the day itself, to the extent that any relevant intelligence was derived from interception, it was shared with RUC HQ and special branch south promptly and fully."

Sir Peter also says: "There is no evidence whatever before me to make good the assertion . . . that, on August 14th, the Garda had warned the police of a likely attack." He goes on: "Special branch did not identify to GCHQ any particular phone number as being of particular importance or relevance to a potential bombing (in Omagh or elsewhere), nor is there any evidence that special branch believed that GCHQ could pinpoint the location of a particular mobile phone."

The report says that before, on and after August 15th, "GCHQ ensured that intelligence from any interception that might have been relevant to [the then] RUC special branch for its operational purposes was promptly being made available to them; this included near real-time provision of information by telephone [that is almost immediately after a call had been listened to itself in near real time] in accordance with pre-agreed criteria.

"In addition, written intelligence reports were issued within hours of interception in broad accordance with procedures agreed between GCHQ and special branch south."

According to Sir Peter: "By 1998 dissident republicans were well aware that telephone communications were not secure. It was normal for the dissidents to use guarded language and code words . . . They rarely identified themselves or those to whom they spoke or named clearly those about whom they spoke. Voice identification of those participating in a telephone call was imprecise."

On the basis of evidence from an independent expert witness from a mobile provider, Sir Peter said he was also satisfied that in 1998 it was neither possible to track mobile phones in real time nor to visualise the location and movement of mobile phones in the way shown on *Panorama* .

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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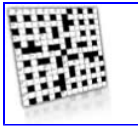
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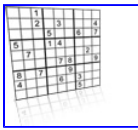
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