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Monday, September 15, 2008

British agency tracked calls of Omagh bombers

GERRY MORIARTY, Northern Editor

BRITAIN'S SPECIAL security intelligence monitoring agency, GCHQ, intercepted mobile telephone calls of the Omagh bombers on the day of the Real IRA bombing in August 1998, it has been claimed.

GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters) was tracking the phones of the bombers before the explosion that killed 29 men, women and children, including a woman heavily pregnant with twin girls, and on the actual day of the bombing itself, according to a BBC *Panorama* investigation.

Michael Gallagher, whose son Aidan was killed in the bombing, said yesterday the claim further reinforced the necessity for an independent public cross-Border inquiry.

The programme, *Omagh: What the Police Were Never Told* to be broadcast on BBC 1 tonight, reports that GCHQ based in Cheltenham in England was recording mobile phone conversations between some of the bombers as they drove from the Republic to Omagh.

Panorama argues that this finding raises new questions about whether the bombing, the single worst attack of the Troubles, could have been prevented.

Panorama in a statement not included in tonight's 30-minute programme, also cites Belfast police sources reporting that the day before the bombing the RUC was warned by the Garda of a possible cross-Border attack involving a vehicle. A senior detective in Belfast said the warning referred to a device "moving the next day".

RUC special branch assessed that it would be a car bomb in the Portadown, Banbridge, Newry area, according to the programme. The programme reports that while by law the GCHQ intercepts could not have been used as evidence in court, the "intelligence could have directed detectives through the right doors in the hours after the bombing".

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"Detectives were given nothing until three-and-a-half weeks after the bombing, and even then all they were given was a list of names. They were never told that GCHQ were onto the bombers, and the full extent of GCHQ's intercept intelligence was withheld from them," *Panorama* says.

"Even the fact that the bombers had used mobile phones to co-ordinate the bombing was kept secret," it claims.

The programme refers to confusion about who had details about the bombers and when they had it. One source tells *Panorama* that GCHQ sent details of the conversations to Northern Ireland within six hours of the bombing - but former senior PSNI officer Raymond White said his former colleagues in police special branch categorically denied this.

The programme also refers to a 1999 British Home Office meeting chaired by the head of MI5 Sir Stephen Lander which discussed the case for and against using telephone intercepts as evidence.

Mr Gallagher, of the Omagh Support and Self Help Group, said the programme strengthened the demands for a public inquiry. "We have been demanding a public inquiry since 2002 into the abysmal failure of the police inquiries. The government can no longer resist this," he said.

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