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Nelson's killers 'known to RUC' soon after attack

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GERRY MORIARTY, Northern Editor

THE NAMES of the Loyalist Volunteer Force gang members who killed Lurgan solicitor Rosemary Nelson in a booby-trap car bomb attack almost 10 years ago were known to police shortly after the murder, former RUC chief constable Sir Ronnie Flanagan has told the Rosemary Nelson Inquiry.

While no one was convicted of the March 1999 murder, Sir Ronnie said yesterday that soon after the killing, RUC special branch had identified the two people who carried out the bombing and the person who made the bomb.

Sir Ronnie, on his third and final day giving evidence, said special branch was "confident in this view. It was not a question that these three were mere suspects."

While the LVF admitted the bombing, using the Red Hand Defenders' cover name, Sir Ronnie said the person who actually made the bomb may have come from another loyalist organisation. He said the murder of Mrs Nelson was a dreadful human tragedy: "It remains my hope that some time those responsible might be brought to justice."

Sir Ronnie said there was nothing he or his officers could have done to save the life of Mrs Nelson. He said he had gone over in his mind whether he could or should have acted differently in relation to the period before she was murdered.

In that regard he would have made sure that Mrs Nelson was seen personally by police and given advice about her safety, he told the inquiry. "That didn't take place," he acknowledged.

Nonetheless he was convinced that with the absence of intelligence about a threat to her life it would not have been possible to protect Mrs Nelson from the loyalist paramilitaries who were determined to kill her.

"With the benefit of hindsight I come to the genuine conclusion that, in the absence of any intelligence that Mrs Nelson was under threat from the sort of thugs and cowards

that murdered her, it would not have made any difference – that is the sad conclusion that I come to.”

He added: “Quite a number of my friends died in the way that Mrs Nelson died and it was not possible to protect their lives.”

He said to describe her killing as a police intelligence failure would be to “denigrate” officers who strove to carry out their duty. “To describe it as a failure is an unfair description,” he said. “Intelligence is not infallible.”

Sir Ronnie referred to the fact that 302 police officers were killed and 7,000 seriously maimed or injured in the Troubles and said if that were replicated in England and Wales, the figure would be 10,000 murdered and 250,000 seriously maimed or injured.

The inquiry was shown a number of RUC special branch documents which contained references to the alleged relationship between Mrs Nelson and Lurgan republican Colin Duffy, whom she successfully represented against murder charges.

Mrs Nelson was baldly referred to as Mr Duffy’s “lover” and there was also reference to IRA “alibis”, and of the IRA being “assisted by their solicitor”.

The inquiry also heard that former Northern secretary Mo Mowlam authorised the bugging of a house owned by Mrs Nelson which Mr Duffy was renting, and that she was conscious about sensitivities around this.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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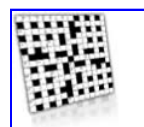
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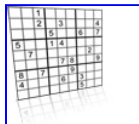
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