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RUC special branch had 'serial killer on books'

Gerry Moriarty, Dan Keenan, Frank Millar and Alexandra Cochrane

A damning report by Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan has found that RUC special branch knowingly had a "serial killer on its books" whose north Belfast UVF gang was involved in up to 15 murders, as well as numerous other forms of crime including attempted murders and drugs dealing.

Mrs O'Loan in her report vindicated the claims of Raymond McCord snr that elements in the special branch colluded with north Belfast UVF members responsible for the 1997 murder of his son, Raymond jnr. This collusion could not have happened without the "knowledge and support" of the most senior police officers, she added.

She did not identify the leader of this gang whom she described as a "serial killer" - referring to him as Informant 1 - but several senior security sources confirmed that he is Mark Haddock, currently serving a 10-year sentence for inflicting grievous bodily harm on doorman Trevor Gowdy in 2002.

Over a 10-year period from 1991 to 2003, the informant Haddock was directly implicated in at least 10 murders, and possibly 15 murders, and numerous other crimes, Mrs O'Loan reported.

During most of that period Haddock worked for special branch who protected him and other informants from being made accountable for these killings, she found. During this period he was paid at least £79,840, she reported yesterday.

Mrs O'Loan said she believed her investigators were thwarted from properly pursuing their inquiry through a deliberate special branch policy established in 1997 to ignore general rules about maintaining records and from a failure to keep proper files before then. She said that because of missing, lost and destroyed files senior former police officers could not be prosecuted.

She believed "this was not an oversight but was a deliberate strategy that had the effect of avoiding proper accountability".

Justin Felice, head of the ombudsman's investigating team, said numerous officers, including three former assistant chief constables, refused to co-operate with the inquiry and of those that dealt with the team some were "evasive or farcical" in their responses.

Mrs O'Loan concluded that her investigation established "collusion between certain officers within special branch" and the Mount Vernon unit of the UVF run by Haddock.

She levelled her most serious criticism at the top of the RUC and PSNI. "It would be easy to blame the junior officers' conduct in dealing with various informants and indeed they are not blameless. However, they could not have operated as they did without the knowledge and support at the highest levels of the RUC and PSNI."

She complimented current chief constable Sir Hugh Orde, however, and said she was satisfied that the PSNI had "accepted the mistakes of the past and put in place policies and procedures to help ensure they will not happen in the future".

Sir Hugh accepted her findings and apologised for the police failings. He is to re-open inquiries into all the killings on her recommendation.

Her criticism of the police leadership prompted SDLP leader Mark Durkan to call for the resignation of Sir Ronnie Flanagan from his post as chief inspector of the UK police watchdog, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. Mr McCord snr also said that if he had knowledge of the actions of special branch he should resign and be stripped of his knighthood.

Channel 4 last night put it to Sir Ronnie in London that when Mrs O'Loan was referring to the "high- est levels" of the police he therefore must have been included in that criticism. "I would refute that absolutely and categorically," he said. The British home secretary, John Reid, a former Northern secretary, rallied to his support last night.

There were concerns that the impact of the report could undermine Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams's attempt to persuade Sunday's ardfheis to endorse the PSNI. Mr Adams said republicans would not be shocked by the revelations and that the report would be an incentive for republicans to ensure the PSNI was held accountable.

Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, who has taken a personal interest in the allegations made by Mr McCord snr, said while much has changed for the better in policing in the North, the report confirmed that the concerns of Irish governments about collusion were "well-founded.

Former police officers rejected Mrs O'Loan's report saying they "deeply regret the damage she has caused to the reputation of many fine officers who were doing their duty on behalf of the community at great personal risk".

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