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O'Loan uncovers RUC collusion with killers

Gerry Moriarty and Dan Keenan

Northern Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan has found that several RUC Special Branch officers colluded with North Belfast Ulster Volunteer Force members who were involved in more than a dozen murders, senior sources have told The Irish Times.

Her report, which will be published on Monday, finds that a significant number of Special Branch officers were complicit in protecting UVF agents or informers even though they knew they were directly

involved in murders of Protestants and Catholics, the sources said.

The report, based on an investigation known as Operation Ballast, is also going to the North's Director of Public Prosecutions who must now decide if former RUC officers should face very serious crime charges.

"There is intelligence within the policing system linking UVF members from its Mount Vernon unit in north Belfast to many killings, and that RUC Special Branch officers protected them from being made accountable to the law," said a senior source yesterday.

The report was triggered by the 1997 UVF murder of Raymond McCord jnr, allegedly on the orders of UVF Mount Vernon leader Mark Haddock, who is currently serving 10 years for the grievous bodily harm of Trevor Gowdy, a doorman at a social club in Monkstown, near Belfast in 2002.

Haddock, whom some of his UVF colleagues attempted to kill last May, also acted as an informer for Special Branch, it is claimed.

Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, who was briefed by Raymond McCord snr and others about Haddock and the claims of almost endemic RUC Special Branch collusion, has taken a special interest in the case, and raised his concerns with British prime minister Tony Blair.

The period of alleged collusion - which solely relates to Mount Vernon UVF and not the overall UVF organisation - mainly runs from January 1993, when Catholic Sharon McKenna was murdered while helping a Protestant pensioner, to October 2000, when former Ulster Democratic Party leader Tommy English was shot dead in a UDA-UVF loyalist feud.

Other alleged victims of Haddock and his gang include Catholics Gary Convie and Eamon Fox, shot dead in 1994; Protestant Thomas Sheppard, shot dead as an alleged informer in 1996; Protestant clergyman the Rev David Templeton, who died in 1997 after a brutal beating; and Protestant Billy Harbinson, allegedly an informer, who died after a beating in 1997.

The report, which was last night presented to the PSNI Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde and Northern Secretary Peter Hain, is the most comprehensive inquiry conducted to date by Mrs O'Loan.

It is bigger, and more expensive, than her Omagh bombing inquiry, and has potentially politically damaging consequences. The report comes as Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams is attempting to persuade rank-and-file republicans to sign up to policing ahead of tomorrow week's deciding ardfheis on the matter.

He chairs the first of a series of difficult public meetings on the issue this afternoon in Co Derry.

Mr Adams has told The Irish Times: "[The report] will indicate there was collusion and it will show

some of the dastardly things that were done by police officers." He said this would act as an argument for republicans to become involved in policing.

Overall, the report covers the period from 1991 to 2003 when four chief constables were in charge of policing: Sir Hugh Annesley from 1989 to 1996; former head of RUC Special Branch Sir Ronnie Flanagan from 1996 to 2002; the late Colin Cramphorn, acting chief constable during 2002; and current Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde, who took office in September 2002.

The report will raise serious questions about how RUC Special Branch was run, and about the overall leadership of the RUC. It is also expected, however, to be complimentary of Sir Hugh Orde's stewardship and the raft of reforms carried out under him, expressing a conviction that officers who were involved in this alleged murderous collusion left, were rooted out or are being rooted out of the force.

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