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PSNI 'under pressure' to avoid rifts with collusion inquiries

Political pressure made it more difficult for the PSNI to raise security concerns about sensitive information at public inquiries, it was claimed today.

Officers faced demands to avoid a rift with any panel investigating security force collusion in killings, a PSNI memo said.

The warning was finalised for a Westminster committee a month before this May's loss of a disc containing sensitive personal material by the Rosemary Nelson Inquiry. The Catholic lawyer (40) was killed by loyalists almost a decade ago.

PSNI assistant chief constable Alistair Finlay said: "Our position is that the inquiries do not have the policies and procedures available to them and nor are they themselves subject to independent scrutiny with regard to their safekeeping of sensitive and critical information, information for which this Service has liability for.

"I will be frank in stating that the political pressure on the PSNI not to be seen to cause a rift with any inquiry in face of questions about collusion has made querying the state of inquiry security all the more stressful."

This stress was caused by the lack of clarity surrounding responsibilities and liabilities once the documents were handed over, he told the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in written evidence dated April 6th.

In May the Nelson Inquiry confirmed that a disc with personal and protectively marked material had been lost. The team said it deeply regretted the serious breach of secure data handling standards.

Mrs Nelson died after a booby-trap bomb left by loyalists exploded under her car in March 1999 in Craigavon, Co Armagh.

Retired judge Sir Michael Morland is chairing a three-strong panel examining alleged security force collusion.

The inquiry must determine whether the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), Northern Ireland Office (NIO), Army or other state agency

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facilitated the murder, or blocked attempts to investigate it.

The other public inquiries concern the deaths of Robert Hamill (25), a Catholic killed by a loyalist mob in Portadown, Co Armagh, in 1997, and Billy Wright (37), the former leader of the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF), shot dead by republicans inside the Maze Prison in December 1997.

The Bloody Sunday inquiry surrounds the shooting dead by British soldiers of 14 civil rights protesters in Derry in 1972.

Mr Finlay, in a written submission to the committee, recommended a mandatory memo of understanding assigning accountability to the inquiries on secure handling and management and storage.

He said that when inquiries held information ordinarily subject to scrutiny by an oversight body, like the intelligence services, then that scrutiny body's remit should extend to the inquiry.

"It may well be that the Cabinet Office or another body accepts responsibility for this- but right now this is operating on good faith and a promise," he added.

The senior officer also called for people involved to be bound by the Official Secrets Act.

The NIO has said its review concluded that overall there was an adequate or good level of security being applied within all the independent public inquiries.

Recommendations also included strengthening security guidance in place with each of the four public inquiries and ensuring all government agencies adhere to the rules when supplying classified information.

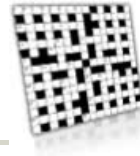
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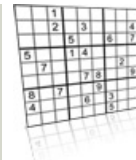
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