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RUC was running UVF gang

Sunday, January 21, 2007 - By Colm Heatley

For the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force), it was a routine operation.

A small-time criminal owed them some drugs money and he was going to pay up or be killed. Three of the group took Raymond McCord Jr to a disused quarry and beat him to death with iron bars and hammers. The chief murderer was on weekend parole and, with his handlers in Special Branch aware of his paramilitary activities, he thought little about the murder.

Tomorrow, just over nine years since McCord's murder took place, then a Police Ombudsman's report into that killing and at least a dozen others is expected to be the most damning ever written about the police in the North.

It points to a trail of collusion between the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and loyalist paramilitaries in murder, and in extortion, corruption and threats that led to the deaths of 18 people in Belfast until 2003. The report will be a body-blow to the North's policing legacy.

The Ombudsman's report comes just a week before Sinn Fein holds its extraordinary ard fheis to decide whether to endorse the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

The report's findings graphically illustrate one of the principal reasons why many republicans and nationalists find accepting and endorsing policing so difficult - the police colluded with loyalist paramilitaries, which they believe resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Catholics during the Troubles.

For many nationalists, the RUC and their successors in the PSNI are the legal arm of the UVF and Ulster Defence Association (UDA), providing help and assistance to the paramilitaries on an almost daily basis.

The Ombudsman's report, delivered to Northern Secretary Peter Hain and the PSNI chief constable last Friday morning, will confirm many of those fears.

What the report uncovered was a police force that regarded human life as cheap a force, that was more concerned with protecting its informers than the public, and that effectively ran the UVF in north Belfast, an area with the highest level of sectarian murders during the troubles.

That such collusion could exist years after the ceasefires were called, and the Good Friday Agreement signed, is evidence of how deeply ingrained and systematic it was in the North's security forces.

The report is the latest in a list of investigations that has uncovered collusion between the British state and loyalist gangs in Ireland, north and south. For many republicans it is further proof that the security forces propped up the Northern state with sectarian murder.

The north Belfast UVF gang that carried out the murders investigated by Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan, was run almost from top to bottom by the RUC Special Branch.

Its 'military commander', Mark Haddock, who ordered McCord's murder and many others, was a long-term Special Branch agent. Its quartermaster, brigadier, deputy brigadier and chief gunman are also strongly suspected of being in the pay of the Special Branch.

When RUC officers from outside Special Branch, such as Detective Jonty Brown, tried to bring killers such as Haddock to justice, the Special Branch response was to threaten their police colleagues.

"I was told to fuck off, that Haddock was none of my concern and to mind my own business," said Brown.

When McCord was murdered on November 9, 1997, it was just another grim statistic in the North, a murder destined to be attributed to internal UVF feuding and forgotten soon afterwards. In large part, it was the campaigning work of his father, Raymond McCord Sr, which led to the Ombudsman's investigation.

Viewed as a crank and a troublemaker, his claim that his son's murder was ordered and carried out by Special Branch agents was dismissed at the time.

His persistence, though, has seemingly paid off and tomorrow's report is expected to vindicate all of his key claims, although the investigation found no evidence that Special Branch had prior warning of his son's death. Brutal though the McCord murder was, it is the wider activities of the UVF gang and their controllers in Special Branch that is due to be the most damning indictment of policing in the North.

Another of the UVF gang's victims was Sharon McKenna, a 27-year-old Catholic woman, murdered in north Belfast on January 17, 1993.

She was visiting an elderly Protestant man on the city's Shore Road when the gang struck.

The Ombudsman's report is expected to say that her killers were RUC Special Branch agents. Perhaps what the report won't include is that, after the murder, two of her killers went to their handlers and told them what had taken place.

"They were told to stop worrying so much and go out and get a few pints," said one former senior detective who knew how the murder had taken place.

"The two of them were given a few quid by the Branch men and told to relax, that was how Special Branch treated the murder of an innocent young woman killed by their informers."

The public version of the Ombudsman's report will not name individual informers or policemen who are implicated in the killings.

Instead, it will refer to the police by rank.

The report is limited to looking at the role of Haddock's North Belfast UVF unit and hasn't examined the role of Special Branch agents in the wider UVF organisation. But McCord Sr said he intended naming names at a press conference in Belfast tomorrow.

"This report vindicates what I have been saying for years and it shows that the UVF were run by the police. They were a proxy army for the Special Branch, carrying out murders of Protestants and Catholics at will," said McCord.

"I have evidence to say that the UVF's leader in the whole of Northern Ireland has been a Special Branch agent since the 1980s and I will be naming him."

Among other incidents that Haddock's UVF unit is believed to have been involved in are two bombings in Co Monaghan in 1997 and the Loughinisland Massacre in June 18, 1994, which claimed the lives of six men.

It is understood that UVF men from Haddock's unit drove the homemade bombs across the border, a move that is regarded as unusual because it would have been easier to get a UVF gang based close to the border to carry out the attack.

An informer nicknamed 'The Mechanic' was responsible for providing the getaway cars used by the UVF gang who machine-gunned a Catholic bar in Loughinisland as their victims watched Ireland play Italy in the World Cup in June 1994.

The timing of the report's publication could hardly be more topical.

It takes place against a backdrop of intensive debate within the broader republican family about whether or not to endorse the PSNI.

In Derry last week, a meeting of republicans opposed to Sinn Fein's policing strategy was attended by more than 400 people. It heard calls for candidates to be fielded against Sinn Fein in elections in March, should they be held.

Last week, party president Gerry Adams said he would hold talks with those opposed to the party's policing strategy and with armed dissident groups.

But the message seemingly coming from some of those disaffected republicans was that the offer was too little, too late.

They argue that Sinn Fein intends to push ahead with supporting the police at next Sunday's ard fheis, regardless of reaction from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) or republican concerns.

If next Sunday's ard fheis does back the Sinn Fein leadership's call to support the police, it will not lead to an immediate change in republican policy towards the PSNI. Instead, the Sinn Fein ard comhairle will be mandated to decide when the policy will be implemented.

For those opposed to supporting the PSNI, tomorrow's report will be ample evidence that to support the police is tantamount to treachery.

Not only will they attack the PSNI on ideological grounds, but on the basis that it is has also been involved in multiple murders in the very recent past.

They will ask some of the questions that the report doesn't answer, including: are some of the police who were involved in Haddock's UVF gang now members of the PSNI? Adams and his supporters will

argue that, if such collusion is to be consigned to the past, it is essential that republicans get their hands on the levers of power. There is, however, unlikely to be a meeting of minds between the two sides.

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