

Who will pay for mass murder?

Sunday, January 28, 2007 - By Tom McGurk

So that's it then. The popular press and political consensus following Nuala O'Loan's Report is as follows: a small group of RUC Special Branch officers went overboard when running their informers in one small area in north Belfast.

Up to 15 murders and an unknown number of other crimes resulted - but it won't happen again.

Many very senior officers, including two (there were only five) former deputy RUC chief constables refused to help the inquiry. The man in charge, both of the Special Branch and the RUC itself for separate periods during this time, Sir Ronnie Flanagan, apparently knew nothing of the crimes and spent only four hours in total with the inquiry team.

But that's all right, because - according to no less a figure than the British Home Secretary John Reid - Flanagan is above suspicion. As Inspector of Her Majesty's Constabulary, he will remain Britain's top policeman, whose everyday job it is to check out how all its police forces are behaving.

By the way, none of the police officers involved in the crimes will be charged anyway because most of the evidence has apparently been destroyed - this was routine RUC practice at the time.

The British political class was very upset.

But don't worry because, according to Tony Blair and his Northern secretary Peter Hain, it can never happen again because the PSNI now operates under totally different standards.

We were also solemnly warned that some scumbags from the UVF may well face prosecution - imagine who they will summon as witnesses - but in the meantime, the public should calm down. They should be like those law and order folk in the DUP and just keep their heads down and say nothing.

So there you have it. It was all a "storm in a very dirty tea-cup"; a few "rotten apples in the barrel"; perhaps even an "excessive devotion to duty" in the battle with a ruthless enemy during a 30-year war. By the way, it wasn't the lead item on any British television news bulletin, because of all that loot to plunder washing up on the beaches in Devon.

There is, of course, another version of all of this and with the week that's in it, it would do no harm to give it an outing.

From the very beginning of the war in the North, the British decided that their counter-insurgency strategy against the IRA dictated that they could not tolerate two paramilitary armies conducting their own war, besides the one being fought between the IRA and the British army.

There were a number of important political, strategic and military reasons for this. For a start, the loyalists were potentially a far more serious threat to British policy in the North than the IRA.

They represented the majority and they constituted a huge segment within both the RUC and the UDR- critical to the ongoing security situation. Further, since their rationale was entirely sectarian, if allowed run amok, they could very quickly tip the North into civil war.

It was even possible that, if allowed their independent military existence along with emerging political demands, they could in the long run become a threat to the British 'mainland' - in the same manner as the Algerian piers-noirs in France - or even attack the Irish Republic.

In other words, an independent paramilitary loyalist army would stymie British political options, maximise the security crisis and become a powerful player whenever the political end game loomed.

A strategy was evolved to deal with this potential crisis with the whole thing conducted under the auspices of British intelligence.

From the outset it was deemed by British military strategists that they would have to control and run all loyalist paramilitary groups in secret.

This was a complex strategy. To work it would mean giving the impression to the loyalists themselves

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and the watching world that their force was independent, while at the same time pulling the strings whenever political or strategic demands required it.

Since the vast majority joining up were poor enough political or revolutionary material, by the surreptitious use of agents, informers and organised crime, the UVF and the UDA were contained and controlled.

A central plank in this containment operation was the widespread acceptance of criminal activity involving protection rackets, illegal cigarette and alcohol sales and the drugs trade. British intelligence quickly identified the types they required - usually working class thugs with aspirations to riches and delusions of grandeur.

So the loyalist paramilitary "commander" with his cars, girls, clothes and lifestyle was born. Johnny Adair, Billy Wright, Robin Jackson and a host of others came and briefly starred.

From the outset, all the top loyalist paramilitaries were compromised by their handlers. If they got out of line, the list of those subsequently killed in "feuds" is there for all to see. With control of the leaders of paramilitary loyalism, their wider potential threat was stymied.

Their subsequent direction then became a part of a wider ongoing policy to engage the IRA. The sectarian assassination campaign against the Catholic population was considered critically important.

While it served to calm loyalist community frustrations and demands for law and order, strategically it also put huge pressure on the IRA in its heartland, terrified its supporters and destabilised its support base.

Whenever the IRA responded violently it seemed to give the lie to republican claims that their war was a non-sectarian campaign.

So tit for tat killings became a method of containing the war and undermining the IRA's political strategy and the movement's wider identity. As a consequence, the war in the North could be characterised not as a liberation struggle but rather a nasty sectarian conflict. It was in fact the ultimate act in criminalising the IRA campaign.

Attacks in the South also became an integral part of this strategy. Early bombings in Dublin served to encourage Dublin to enact tougher security legislation in the Dail, and later attacks in Dublin, Monaghan and Dundalk served to threaten the southern economy and to damage the IRA in the eyes of southern public opinion.

Throughout, British political strategists watched opinion in the South carefully - as they had done ever since the Bloody Sunday debacle. Turning the North into a sectarian killing ground was critical in shaping southern political and public opinion.

Remarkably, attacks in the South were carefully contained, for which many Dublin governments should be grateful. Had loyalist paramilitaries been truly independent, it could have been much worse.

High on the list in the North were selective assassinations for various political or strategic reasons. Victims included John Turnley, Ronnie Bunting, Miriam Daly, Rosemary Nelson, Pat Finucane and Bernadette McAliskey, who survived her attack.

As the peace process began, an organised campaign against Sinn Fein councillors was unleashed, killing seven.

Its purpose was to hasten Sinn Fein's appetite for a ceasefire and politics.

Central to all of this strategy was the hands-on operation by both military intelligence officers and RUC Special Branch.

What O'Loan characterised this week as seemingly part of the police force out of control and oblivious to every document in the criminal code was actually the modus operandi of this counter-insurgency strategy in operation.

Nor is it simply credible that North Belfast was a one-off, its RUC Special Branch somehow different - this strategy operated province-wide.

To date, all attempts to reveal this dirty war have been stymied. John Stalker was first in and quickly out; the then not very subtle members of the RUC Special Branch actually burned down his investigation office in Belfast. Then there was Lord Stevens twice, and now Judge Barron and Patrick McEntee are digging. One wishes them luck.

Interestingly, O'Loan's report, since the DPP is loath to act, may actually be a subtle operation for releasing the pressure, public and journalistic on this criminal legacy - indeed as this week has subsequently proved, doing it in the most advantageous circumstances for the political establishment.

The Police Ombudsman's office in the North may now be actually unwittingly part of as a subtly orchestrated cleaning-up operation; those who wrote this script are telling it in their way and in their timeframe.

The central problem, of course, is that the British establishment has to protect those in their

intelligence services and police forces who ran this operation and the politicians who approved it. Don't ever expect to see any of them in court to face any charges for the very good reason that their defence will be to open up an appalling vista of state-sponsored mass-murder and criminality. "They were under orders, m'lord."

No wonder senior RUC officers can thumb their noses at O'Loan, no wonder Flanagan is still super-cop, no wonder the DPP has already signalled that there will be no prosecutions of police officers.

Nor I suspect was all the evidence totally destroyed, as O'Loan suggests. I suspect that all of these men and women have kept every conceivable bit of paper should the terrible day arrive that they have to explain.

From the dock then, notes in hand, they in their turn would be pointing the finger. But upwards.

The facts are stark and require some reflection.

As a response to armed insurrection in the North, the British government down through the years initiated a campaign of mass murder and a wider supporting criminality as a critical part of its counter-insurgency strategy. Hundreds of citizens of this country and of Britain have been murdered.

Many readers, of course, simply will not believe this thesis. If that's the case it simply means the strategy was even more effective than its original genius Brigadier Frank Kitson, author of Low Intensity Operations, could have imagined. It should be on the best-seller list.

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