

Civil rights lawyer murdered in Northern Ireland

Crime reveals links between police and paramilitaries

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The brutal murder of 40-year-old lawyer and human rights defender Rosemary Nelson on March 15 has raised fresh allegations of Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) intimidation of lawyers in Northern Ireland and their collusion with Unionist paramilitaries.

Nelson died when a car bomb blew apart her BMW as she drove away from home in Lurgan, about 30 miles south-west of Belfast. The blast tore away her legs and ripped into her abdomen. After being cut free from the wreckage by fire fighters, Nelson died two hours later in hospital.

The death has provoked outpourings of condemnation by all parties in Ireland, Britain and the United States, in the run-up to the Good Friday deadline for the transfer of powers from London to Belfast contained in last year's Northern Ireland Agreement.

In a coded message to BBC Belfast, a loyalist paramilitary group, the "Red Hand Defenders", claimed responsibility for the killing. The Red Hand Defenders emerged during the Drumcree crisis last summer, when the loyalist Orange Order was banned from marching along the mainly Catholic Garvaghy Road in Portadown, County Armagh. It has been linked to a series of sectarian attacks on Catholics. The group is said by security sources to be a front for the Loyalist Volunteer Force, which is nominally committed to a cease-fire and is the only paramilitary group to have handed over weapons under the peace process decommissioning agreement.

Media and political commentators have indicated grave concerns over the threat Nelson's murder poses for the peace process. But allegations of RUC collusion in the killing are potentially even more damaging.

Rosemary Nelson, a solicitor in private practice in

Northern Ireland for the last 12 years, was a respected civil rights lawyer willing to take up politically sensitive cases. At the time of her death, she was championing the rights of Catholics living on the Garvaghy Road district near Portadown. Last week she disclosed she was preparing 200 compensation claims against the RUC arising from the long running stand-off with the Orange Order.

Her life had been threatened on numerous occasions by members of the RUC, primarily through threats passed on via her clients, according to a statement issued by a human rights coalition including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights.

Concern over the re-emergence of allegations of collusion between security forces and loyalist terrorists in targeting Republican and nationalist figures has prompted the appointing of Kent police Chief David Phillips to head the investigation. RUC Chief Sir Ronnie Flanagan said he was determined the murder investigation would not only be "as meticulous as it could be", but would also be "transparently obvious to all as such".

Only a few weeks ago, Mrs. Nelson had demanded an inquiry into alleged collusion between British security forces and Protestant paramilitaries that led to the 1989 killing of prominent nationalist lawyer Pat Finucane. She submitted a report to the British and Irish governments containing new evidence of police collusion in Finucane's murder.

Finucane was shot by Ulster Defence Association (UDA) members who had been passed information in prison by a British Army intelligence agent, Brian Nelson, who was serving a six-year prison sentence

after a deal with the attorney general in a murder trial in 1992. Security forces were informed of this but either took no action to prevent the assassination, or, more likely, actively supported it.

Finucane's murder immediately followed a statement in the House of Commons by then British Cabinet Minister Douglas Hogg: "There are in Northern Ireland a number of solicitors who are unduly sympathetic to the cause of the IRA.... I state this on the basis of advice that I have received, guidance that I have been given by people who are dealing with these matters."

It is clear that Rosemary Nelson fell into this category. The death threats against her were well known. In a 1998 report, Param Cumaraswamy, the UN Special Reporter on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, drew specific attention to them. In a televised interview he suggested that Mrs. Nelson's life could be in danger. Cumaraswamy's report called for a judicial inquiry into the killing of Finucane.

Nelson was instrumental in the preparation of this. In 1998 she was invited to testify before the US Congress at the House International Relations Committee's investigation into the human rights situation in Northern Ireland. She explained in her testimony that she had received "several death threats against myself and members of my family. I have also received threatening telephone calls and letters. Although I have tried to ignore these threats inevitably I have had to take account of the possible consequences for my family and my staff".

Nelson's death has provoked considerable anger in the Catholic community. There have been overnight demonstrations outside the RUC base in the area, and young people have thrown stones and petrol bombs at British soldiers. Police dressed in riot gear are guarding the site of the explosion.

As the political fallout from Nelson's murder unfolds, the main players in the Irish peace arrangements are assembling in Washington for an audience with US President Clinton. Labour's Mo Mowlam, Northern Ireland Assembly first minister, David Trimble and Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams were in Washington for St. Patrick's Day celebrations to make preparations for the next stage of the so-called peace process.

The response of official political circles to the murder was summed up in the remarks of Gerry Adams who said: "The attack on Rosemary Nelson is an attack on

the Good Friday Agreement, which proclaims the rights of citizens to live free from sectarian harassment."

Far from Nelson's murder going against the grain of the Agreement, it is only the latest in a series of tragic events that underscore the inability of the "peace process" to resolve the problems of the Irish people. There have been repeated calls to make the RUC more accountable to the Catholic community and Sinn Fein have declared that they await the day they can tell Catholics to join. But whatever changes are implemented, this will do nothing to protect the democratic rights of the Irish working class, both Catholic and Protestant. Rather, the destruction of social conditions and wage levels necessary to attract investment to Ireland demands the suppression of the democratic rights of working people, which in turn calls for evermore repressive policing and the preservation of sectarian divisions.



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