

Northern Ireland: Just incompetence or police collusion in Omagh bombing?

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The publication of an official report into the police investigation of the 1998 Omagh bomb, which killed 29 people, has provoked a flurry of criticism from the media, politicians and the police.

The report, by Police Ombudsman, Nuala O'Loan, focuses on the fact that the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) had repeatedly been tipped off that an attack was in preparation, the first time some 11 days prior to the bombing. The 12-page document states, "It will never be known whether or not the bombing of Omagh could have been prevented if the RUC had taken more action in relation to the information it received during the period between 4 and 15 August 1998."

When the *Guardian* newspaper began leaking the report the week before it was officially published, Northern Ireland Secretary John Reid condemned "media speculation" as "damaging". Reid said, "There are many people within the media who are suggesting that special branch or someone else in the RUC could have prevented the Omagh bomb. They are not reading the report I have read."

After the report's official release, the Chief Constable of the Northern Ireland Police Service—as the RUC is now known following the implementation of police reforms that are part of the Good Friday Agreement—Ronnie Flanagan called a press conference to defend his force's actions. Flanagan said, "I do not consider the report as any sort of fair or thorough or rigorous investigation. I consider at this stage what has been presented to me is a report of an erroneous conclusion reached in advance, then a desperate attempt to find anything which might happen to fit in with that erroneous conclusion."

Flanagan said legal advice was being sought at both a personal and organisational level.

Peter Mandelson, who was Northern Ireland Secretary for much of the time the RUC was investigating the Omagh bombing, rushed to defend Flanagan. Both in an article in the *Times* and a subsequent radio interview, Mandelson praised the "integrity and courage" of Flanagan and described the O'Loan report as a "very poor piece of work indeed." Mandelson said, "the ombudsman is making the most extreme conclusions about the Chief Constable... she is accusing him of defective leadership, poor judgment and a lack of urgency."

Not only was the Omagh bombing the worst terrorist atrocity in nearly thirty years of the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland, it marked a watershed in the efforts of the British, Irish and US governments' to ensure popular approval of the Good Friday Agreement signed in April 1998. This established the Northern Ireland Assembly and an Executive based on power-sharing between the pro-British Protestant parties and the Irish nationalist and predominantly catholic parties, including Sinn Fein.

The bombing provided a text-book example of the anti-working class perspective pursued by the IRA in Ireland. The Real IRA, a tiny breakaway from Sinn Fein/IRA, and which opposed the Good Friday Agreement, planted the bomb in an attempt to re-ignite sectarian hostilities between Catholics and Protestants, and so derail the new arrangements.

The bomb served an entirely opposed purpose, however. It horrified ordinary working people and allowed the imperialist powers to present themselves as the guardians of peace. Omagh was used to reinforce the claim that the only alternative to the Northern Ireland Agreement was a resumption of sectarian violence.

The bombing was also used to justify the introduction of anti-democratic measures that have severely curtailed political freedoms, in the name of combating terrorism.

From very early on, therefore, speculation arose over the possibility of British and RUC involvement in the bombing. In August this year, a former British double agent calling himself Kevin Fulton made allegations that he had informed the RUC over 48 hours in advance that the Real IRA was going to plant a bomb in Omagh. He alleged that the British and Irish security forces had allowed the bomb to be taken in a stolen car from the nearby town of Dundalk to its final destination in Omagh, because if they had tried to prevent this it could have compromised and possibly exposed agents within the Real IRA.

O'Loan does not directly accuse the RUC of a cover-up, and gives no indication that she believes information was not acted upon for any other reason than incompetence and a "failure of leadership".

Nevertheless, the ombudsman was required to investigate the claims made by Fulton and note other significant facts. Her report not only confirms Fulton's factual account of events, but also points to an earlier warning that Omagh would be bombed: "Eleven days before the bombing the RUC received an anonymous telephone call warning there would be an 'unspecified' terrorist attack on police in Omagh on 15 August 1998."

According to the report, the caller named two people (identified only as C and D). He provided an address of one of the individuals, and the area in which the other one lived. The informer said they would "bring AK47 rifles and a rocket launcher on a given date to the Continuity Irish Republican Army." He gave a nickname for a third individual (E) who was intending to bring the weapons across the border into Northern Ireland, as well as the address to which the weapons would be taken and the name of a further individual (F) who resided at this address. The informer then said the arms would be moved to an unknown address two or three miles from Omagh. He stated that the weapons would be used in an attack on police in Omagh on 15 August 1998. He then agreed to call back the next day.

The 10-minute phone call was taken by an officer at Omagh Police Station who immediately drove to Divisional Headquarters in Enniskillen. There he met the Detective Chief Inspector who escorted him to the Special Branch office where he told officers what he had told by the caller.

The report also notes: "Special Branch took only limited action on the information received on 4 August 1998 and a threat warning was not sent to the Sub-Divisional Commander of Omagh, as required by a Force Order."

It further states, "Special Branch personnel told the Omagh Police

Officer that 'C' and 'D' were 'only smugglers'. The Special Branch Officers had apparently not left the room at any stage before making this assessment," indicating that they knew the individuals concerned.

"It has been established by the Police Ombudsman's Investigators that 'D' had been associated with Republican terrorists in the year before the Omagh Bombing. This was evident in Special Branch records at the date the anonymous call was received," the report notes.

It then adds that from the same records, "The Police Ombudsman's Investigators discovered strong indications for a possible identity of 'E' who had significant subversive involvement with Republican terrorist activity. While this individual may or may not be 'E', the details established provide sufficient grounds for more detailed enquiries to have been made rather than the immediate rejection which occurred."

At the time of Fulton's initial allegations, Flanagan had described his claim that the RUC had prior knowledge of the bombing as "preposterous". But the Police Ombudsman states: "Three days before the bombing of Omagh the RUC also received information from a 'reliable' informant known as Kevin Fulton which indicated that terrorists were about to 'move something North over the next few days'."

Between June 6, 1998 and August 12, 1998, Fulton had five meetings with his police "handler", a Criminal Investigation Department (CID) officer. Between June 6 and 8, 1998, Fulton "gave information regarding 'A' who lived in the Republic of Ireland and was involved with the real IRA. Fulton said that 'A' had been seeking to obtain coffee grinders (sometimes used in the making of bombs)" the report says.

"During a meeting on 12 August 1998, three days prior to the Omagh Bomb, Fulton said the Real IRA 'was about to move something North over the next few days'. Fulton also named another person, 'B', who was assisting 'A'.

"Shortly after the Omagh Bomb, Fulton telephoned his handler to ensure that, in particular, the information he supplied on 12 August 1998 had been recorded," the report notes.

Remarkably, in point 9 it states:

"Records for the meeting with Fulton on 12 August 1998, three days before the Omagh Bomb, and for the meeting with him on 23 July 1998 cannot be found within Special Branch.

"The information was passed by the CID handler to the Force Intelligence Bureau. The Force Intelligence Bureau passed this information to Special Branch.

"The CID handler, additionally, verbally briefed Special Branch about this information but no records exist of this verbal exchange. A Special Branch officer remembers he received calls but cannot provide any details.

"Special Branch states that they have never received these **HIGHLY SIGNIFICANT DOCUMENTS.**" [Emphasis in original]

The latter part of the report deals with the initial RUC investigation into the bombing, and specifically the role of the Special Branch. It cites a review of the RUC investigation conducted between March 24, 2000 and November 17, 2000, noting, "Many evidential opportunities had been missed" in the initial RUC investigation into Omagh.

"The information provided between 4 and 15 August 1998 had not been made available to the Reviewing Team. The Reviewing Officer discovered the existence of the anonymous telephone call of 4 August 1998, in documentation held by the Omagh Bomb Investigation Team on 14 July 2001... The Review Report states that, when found, the anonymous information was marked as 'Intelligence does not refer to Omagh'. No lines of enquiry had been undertaken by the Omagh Bomb Investigation Team relating to the information. The Review Report recommended that this information should be thoroughly researched with a view to assessing its possible implication in the Omagh Bomb atrocity."

The review also states, "when finally located by the Review Team, the 'bomb car' (the murder weapon) was deposited in a car park with a

tarpaulin over it and that it had rusted." The Reviewing Officer identified delays of a whole year before follow up actions were initiated on statements obtained, according to the Police Ombudsman.

The Ombudsman's Report also reveals, "The Senior Investigation Officer was refused access to some Army and Special Branch videos from South Armagh which hampered lines of enquiry." It says that recommendations "that the circumstances of the handling of the 4 August anonymous intelligence be investigated by a senior officer and the suspects investigated" have not been acted upon.

Within two days of the Omagh bombing, the Senior Investigating Officer was provided with only limited intelligence on five 'suspects' by Special Branch. The five were quickly arrested, but eliminated as suspects at an early stage. The Ombudsman's Report notes:

"In the course of this investigation the Police Ombudsman's Investigators discovered that Special Branch Officers decide what intelligence Senior Investigators need to know to conduct their investigations."

The report makes clear that in the case of the Omagh bomb, Special Branch decided that the evidence required was minimal. It "identified 360 intelligence documents within Special Branch which may have been of varying degrees of relevance to the Omagh Bomb investigation. 78 percent of these intelligence documents held by Special Branch have not been passed to the Omagh Bomb Investigation Team."

The report adds that documents relating to 1998 were only a sample of the intelligence examined and that "a wider analysis could identify more." Such an analysis was in large part prevented by the refusal of the RUC to cooperate fully with the investigation. The report states:

"The Chief Constable welcomed the Police Ombudsman's investigation and assured it full cooperation. During the course of this investigation, it is of considerable concern that some critical information was not provided in the initial disclosures that were made to the Police Ombudsman's Investigators. At senior management level the response to the enquiry has been defensive and at times uncooperative."

The Police Ombudsman's Report says that Flanagan specifically was "reluctant to grant access to their material to Police Ombudsman's Investigators and failed to inform those Investigators of a computer system where intelligence, vital to the investigation, was held."

A request for direct access to the intelligence system had to be made on September 21 and Flanagan only agreed to the request on October 9. Some four weeks had passed before investigators finally gained access to the system on October 17.

The report's attempt to blame these repeated failures to act on information simply to poor leadership in the RUC, is hardly credible. The relatives of the Omagh victims have since reiterated their demand for a full public inquiry, in an effort to uncover the truth.



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