

Northern Ireland security force links to loyalist gunmen exposed

Mike Ingram
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In its June 14 edition, the *Guardian* newspaper cited leaked information on the long-awaited report by Metropolitan police commissioner, Sir John Stevens.

Under the heading “Top-level inquiry finds collusion in Ulster murders”, the *Guardian* says, “Widespread collusion between the security forces and loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland continued unchecked for years because a culture of ‘gross unprofessionalism and irresponsibility’ allowed officers to create a climate in which Catholics could be murdered with near impunity, a comprehensive investigation has found.”

Stevens was asked four years ago to reopen his investigation into the 1989 murder of civil rights lawyer Patrick Finucane, a Catholic. The remit for the inquiry was later extended to an examination of the initial Royal Ulster Constabulary (now Police Service of Northern Ireland) investigation into the Finucane killing, following the murder of another Catholic lawyer, Rosemary Nelson, in March 1999.

Citing sources close to the inquiry, the paper says the report, due to be issued in the next few weeks, “found that in many cases the relationship between special branch detectives, army intelligence officers and loyalist paramilitaries was so unprincipled and lacking in accountability that it bordered on ‘institutional collusion’.”

The report apparently stops short of suggesting there was a “sinister web of conspiracy” stretching throughout the RUC and army, or that government ministers officially sanctioned killings. Stevens’ 1990 inquiry had already revealed collusion between the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the British Army’s Force Research Unit (FRU). What is new in the forthcoming report is the extent of RUC collusion.

Stevens “believes that loyalists were incapable of carrying out targeted assassinations without significant help,” the *Guardian* says. Again citing a source close to the inquiry, the paper explains, “There are many anecdotes of special branch officers, when interviewing loyalists, saying ‘you are targeting the wrong people’ and then walking out of the room, leaving photographs and other details on the table.”

The Stevens report maintains that it was not possible to find evidence of whether there was an official policy of collusion within the police service. The *Guardian* notes, “Either by accident or design, the Stevens team found that RUC special branch—which gathers intelligence about terrorists and handles agents—failed to keep records about meetings between officers and paramilitaries, and there appeared to be no guidelines about conduct.” Another

source says, “Northern Ireland special branch kept no records, had no recognised policy code and yet their agents were deployed at the cutting edge of life-threatening situations at more risk than in any other region in the UK.”

Stevens was aware from previous inquiries that Brian Nelson, a double agent recruited by the FRU, had passed Finucane’s personal details to loyalist paramilitaries. Nelson was helping the UDA to identify leading Catholics. He subsequently discovered that two of the UDA gang members suspected of the murder were police informers. According to the *Guardian*, “One of the two guns used was stolen from an army barracks. Sometime later, the weapon was recovered by police officers, who, inexplicably returned it to the army where it was modified—destroying potentially crucial forensic evidence.”

“The *Guardian* has learned that a special branch officer spoke of wanting Mr Finucane, a leading human rights lawyer, killed,” the article states.

The Stevens inquiry was given access to documents from the Ministry of Defence, which detail the activities of soldiers working for FRU. Meticulous records were kept in “secret books”, the existence of which only came to light when a former FRU member, known by the pseudonym, Martin Ingram, came forward.

A number of former FRU soldiers and agents, including Brian Nelson, have apparently been arrested and questioned under caution. According to the *Guardian*, “The former commander of the FRU, Brigadier Gordon Kerr, is to be interviewed under caution within weeks.” Among the remaining questions for the Stevens inquiry is whether the FRU was acting in a maverick fashion or obeying orders from higher up.

The response among Unionists to the leaking of the Stevens report has been to step up demands for Sinn Féin to be suspended from the Northern Ireland Assembly, on the grounds that the IRA has broken its ceasefire through its alleged activities in Columbia.

Their stance was echoed by sections of the media. Ruth Dudley Edwards, writing in the Irish *Independent*, makes a vitriolic attack on the *Guardian* for being irresponsible, claiming, “you can always rely on the *Guardian* which despises British institutions, hates men in uniform, has a weakness for terrorists and loves the whiff of cordite emanating from the Sinn Féin leadership to run with any story that will help republicans.”

Speculating on who leaked the story, Edwards asks, “was it some civil servant who wanted to drive Columbia out of the headlines lest the peace processors come under irresistible pressure

to admit that the IRA is in breach of the ceasefire.”

Edward’s was referring to a leaked report purporting to be from security sources, alleging that three IRA members were sent to Columbia as a training ground to test weapons. The same paper’s security editor, Tom Brady, notes that this claim against the IRA “was released as a British newspaper [the *Guardian*] disclosed Stevens report details showing collusion between the North’s security forces and loyalist paramilitaries, and on the eve of talks between Taoiseach [Irish Prime Minister] Bertie Ahern and British premier Tony Blair after weeks of sectarian violence in Belfast threatened the peace process.

“An anti-terrorist source said last night: ‘The timing is, to say the least, a strange coincidence, given the implications for security forces of Stevens’ findings,’” Brady writes.

Even without the latest report from Stevens, there is already substantial evidence suggesting collusion between loyalist killers, the police and the army.

Pat Finucane was gunned down in his north Belfast home on February 12, 1989, in front of his wife Geraldine and their three children. Two masked gunmen fired a total of 14 shots from a .38 revolver and a 9mm Browning automatic pistol, all of which hit Finucane. He was targeted because of his legal defence of a number of prominent republicans, including IRA hunger striker, Bobby Sands. The Ulster Defence Association/Ulster Freedom Fighters claimed responsibility for the murder.

In the 13 years since the shooting, there have been persistent allegations that special branch detectives suggested Finucane as a possible target to loyalists they were questioning in connection with terrorist offences. Only three weeks prior to the shooting, Douglas Hogg, then a junior minister in the Home Office, told the House of Commons that certain solicitors in Northern Ireland were unduly sympathetic to the IRA. Supporters of Finucane’s relatives argue that this gave the green light to his killers.

Indirect threats had been relayed to Finucane through clients during police interrogation. One report suggested that an RUC officer told a client, “You will not be having Mr Finucane as a solicitor much longer.” On the night of the murder, police roadblocks close to the Finucane family home were lifted.

In 1992, the BBC’s *Panorama* programme interviewed Brian Nelson, the army intelligence plant who became the UDA’s intelligence officer. Nelson said the UDA had asked him to compile a dossier on Finucane’s movements and he had told his army handlers of the request. Nelson, never charged in relation to the Finucane murder, later received a 10-year sentence for other terrorist offences but served only six after striking a deal with Attorney General Patrick Mayhew. Originally brought to trial for murder, Nelson agreed to plead guilty to lesser charges.

According to the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper, he was still on the army payroll in 1998. That year military intelligence documents were handed to one of its journalists, providing evidence “that the British Army’s Force Research Unit (FRU), a branch of Military Intelligence responsible for running agents in Northern Ireland, was complicit in a series of murders carried out by the UDA between 1987 and 1990” [*Daily Telegraph*, March 29, 1989].

The leaked documents confirmed that Nelson was indeed an agent of the FRU working inside the UDA.

The 1999 inquiry headed by Stevens arrested William Stobie, a self-confessed former UDA quartermaster, in connection with the Finucane murder. Stobie announced at his pre-trial court appearance that he was working as an agent of the RUC at the time of the murder. He insisted that he had told his RUC handlers almost a week before the murder that his UDA commander had asked him to supply weapons for a “job” on a top IRA man. Without knowing the identity of the target, Stobie alerted the RUC again to the plot just before the killing. Following the murder he informed the RUC where they could find the principle murder weapon, the Browning pistol. None of this information was acted upon.

In a 1990 trial for arms possession, which Stobie claims was the result of an RUC set-up, he instructed his lawyer to tell the prosecutor that he would tell all he knew about the Finucane case if he was found guilty. This threat was nullified when a police witness made an elementary mistake by referring to previous convictions and the judge declared a mistrial.

Stobie’s story only came to light after it was published by Dublin journalist Ed Muloney, who was subsequently threatened with imprisonment for refusing to hand over transcripts of interviews with the UDA quartermaster. Stobie had given his story to two journalists under an agreement that they were not to be published without his explicit permission, or after his death. Muloney kept his promise, but the other journalist, Neil Mulholland, handed over notes of the interview to the Stevens inquiry and appeared as the chief witness for the prosecution against Stobie. The trial collapsed in December 2001, when Mulholland was deemed mentally unfit to take the witness stand. Less than two weeks after the trial, Stobie was shot dead outside his north Belfast flat.

The forthcoming report leaked to the *Guardian* reviews all of this previously published material. In addition, it is said to contain evidence given to the Stevens team by Ken Barrett, another UDA member alleged to have been one of the gunmen who shot Finucane. He fled to England following Stobie’s murder, fearing he would be next. He is believed to have given evidence to the Stevens team in return for their protection.

The Finucane family have consistently refused to cooperate with the present inquiry on the grounds that Stevens had kept quiet about the findings of his 1989 inquiry and there was no reason to believe this one would be anything but a whitewash. They continue to demand the convening of an independent, public enquiry, a demand supported by Amnesty International, the New York-based Lawyers Committee on Human Rights, and the Committee for the Administration of Justice—a demand that the convening of the Stevens inquiry was aimed at suppressing.



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