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19 December 1995

No of pages including this one:

To: HQ
For: Second Secretary O hUiginn

From: Belfast
From: Joint Secretary

Subj: Killing of Francis Collins

COPY TO:
FST
PSS
MR. F. MURRAY
MR. P. TEAFON
MR. S. DOWLON
MR. T. DALTON

1. I have obtained the following background to the killing of Francis Collins last night in the New Lodge area of North Belfast.
2. The information available to the NIO from the RUC is that at 7.30pm last night two gunmen hijacked a taxi in Spamount Street (off the New Lodge Road), entered Delaney's chip shop on Leppcr Street and shot Collins once in the knee and three times in the chest. The gunmen fled through the rear entrance of the shop. As Collins' wife ran after them, they shouted "Up the IRA". Collins was dead on arrival at the Mater Hospital.
3. Collins, who was 40 years old, served a prison sentence in the early eighties for his part in a Provisional IRA bombing. He also served a five-year sentence more recently (1989-94) for armed robbery. He was known locally for criminal activity, including drug dealing. He was also believed locally to have had an IRA involvement in the past (as his first prison sentence would imply).
4. A pistol was used in the attack. Forensic tests are being carried out at present to establish whether the weapon was used in previous incidents.
5. The two gunmen told the driver of the hijacked taxi that they were from the IRA. They ordered him to walk to McLoughlin's Bar on the Antrim Road (near the New Lodge area) and to stay there. He did so. At 8.30 pm he was advised by someone there that he should report the hijacking of his vehicle and he did so. He is currently being questioned by the RUC about the incident.
6. The police view is that the killing bears all the hallmarks of an IRA operation.

The indications are, however, that the context may have been Collins' involvement in armed robbery rather than in drug dealing (about which there has been some media speculation).

The RUC suspected him strongly of involvement in a number of recent robberies, including one at the Royal Victoria Hospital which netted £37,000. In addition, it is perhaps significant that, although the names of the victims in a number of recent killings with a drugs connection (e.g. the Devine and Kane cases) had previously featured on an alleged IRA "death list" publicised by the FAIT group, Collins' name was not on this list.

The RUC regard FAIT as generally reliable in this area - and Collins' absence from the list, accordingly, as an indication that drugs was not the major concern. Collins was in any event not known as a major player on the drugs scene.

The British side have suggested speculatively that, if e.g. Collins had used IRA hardware in a robbery for his own personal gain, or if he had linked the IRA in any way with such operations, that would already have placed his life in serious danger.

7. No organisation has yet claimed responsibility for the killing. It is recalled, however, that the previous killings were also not claimed. It is perhaps relevant in this connection that a Sinn Fein Councillor who was interviewed on the lunchtime news here conspicuously declined an invitation to condemn the killing (saying merely that Sinn Fein would not condone it).
8. I attach a copy of a press release which the Secretary of State has just issued on the killing. I am told that this is the first occasion on which he has issued a formal public condemnation in relation to a killing of this kind and that this reflects pressure on him to express more active concern about such incidents. You will note that the Secretary of State does not in any way characterise the killing as a breach of the ceasefire.
9. The RUC has not yet issued any statement. It is responding to queries by saying simply that inquiries are continuing. We were told earlier that it would not be describing the incident as a breach of the ceasefire and this line has now been reinforced to us in our exchanges here.
10. There will of course be an opportunity to question the Chief Constable about the case at tomorrow's restricted security session. It is perhaps worth recalling that, in the restricted discussion at the 17 October IGC, the Chief Constable made clear that he did not regard incidents such as the recent Mooney and Kane murders as breaches of the ceasefire. There has since been a further killing in this category (the Devine case). The British side are privately of the view that the Collins case is part of the same series.



NORTHERN IRELAND
Information Service

SECRETARY OF STATE CONDEMNS MURDER

19 December 1995

The Secretary of State, the Rt Hon Sir Patrick Mayhew QC MP, responding to last night's murder of a man in north Belfast said:

"I wholeheartedly condemn last night's brutal murder of Francis Collins in Belfast. There can be no justification for gunning down a man in front of his wife in this cowardly fashion; to do so in the week before Christmas graphically illustrates the total callousness of these vicious gunmen.

Any violence, including such murders where individuals are gunned down in cold blood, is wholly unacceptable in a civilised society. The assassins, whatever their motives and whether or not they are acting on behalf of paramilitary organisations, will be brought to justice for their crimes. The RUC investigation into this crime is in progress and I call on all those genuinely committed to peaceful methods to condemn these murders unreservedly and to co-operate fully with the RUC.

The fact that this killing took place on the very day that the International Body concluded the first phase of its work on the decommissioning issue further underlines the need to remove illegal weapons forever from Northern Ireland society."

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