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Named ex-Branch officers hit out at O'Loan

Ex-Special Branch chiefs - who were publicly named today - hit back tonight at allegations they refused to co-operate with a damning report into police collusion with loyalist killers in Belfast.

After the identities of three former officers at the centre of the row were revealed, they claimed Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan kept them in the dark about her explosive dossier.

Chris Albiston, a retired assistant chief constable, insisted the officers contacted by Mrs O'Loan's team provided information that would assist her inquiry.

Speaking for officers criticised by the Ombudsman, he said: "Some 18 months afterwards when it became apparent that a critical report was being prepared we asked to see the content and the nature of the allegations being made.

"There was no co-operation from her office on this report and officers were unable to see her report until Monday."

The Ombudsman's disclosure that Special Branch handlers paid and shielded an UVF boss behind up to 15 murders has plunged policing in Northern Ireland into crisis and threatened to destroy the RUC's reputation.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair was forced to fend off demands for the resignation of Sir Ronnie Flanagan from his post as head of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary as the devastating findings dominated the Commons.

SDLP leader Mark Durkan insisted Sir Ronnie, as a one-time head of Special Branch and RUC Chief Constable when the UVF's Mount Vernon unit went on the rampage across north Belfast, should have known what was going on.

The Foyle MP also used parliamentary privilege to name the three senior Special Branch officers who Mrs O'Loan claims refused to assist her inquiry.

He said during Prime Minister's questions: "Is it not a disgrace that three former heads of Special Branch failed to co-operate with the Police Ombudsman's investigation - Chris Albiston, Ray White and Freddie Hall - but two of them now attack her report and her office?"

"Anywhere else that would be a national scandal."

Challenging Mr Blair to accept collusion in Ulster was a fact, he demanded: "Can Ronnie Flanagan, who presided over a culture of anything goes but nobody knows, be credible as Chief Inspector of Constabulary?"

The Prime Minister expressed deep and bitter regret for any wrongdoing or impropriety on behalf of those working for Special Branch during the 1990s.

"As a result of the changes some years ago, that cannot happen anymore and it is precisely as a result of the additional scrutiny that we now have that this has been uncovered and lain bare," Mr Blair said.

Amid the unrelenting uproar, both Mrs O'Loan and the current Northern Ireland Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde separately briefed a police scrutiny body in Belfast today.

Neither commented on their meetings with the Policing Board, but one representative described the exchanges with Sir Hugh as robust.

Policing Board Chairman Sir Desmond Rea confirmed afterwards that the authority had accepted an Ombudsman's recommendation to review police response to her report within six months.

"The Board has also agreed that its human rights advisors will examine, validate and report on the implementation of the recommendations; and if appropriate will appoint additional external expertise to assist in their work," Prof Rea said.

There has been outrage at the disclosure that ex-UVF leader Mark Haddock was paid at least stg£80,000 by his handlers and protected from prosecution has been huge.

Ms O'Loan's report referred to a "serial killer" being protected by the Special Branch. Reliable sources say the reference was to Haddock who survived a gun attack last year but was later jailed for 10 years for a brutal assault on a nightclub doorman.

He is currently under armed guard in hospital.

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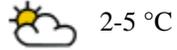
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