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Retired detectives to examine controversial killings of the Troubles

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[The Guardian](#)

A specialist team of former detectives has begun re-examining evidence from Northern Ireland's most controversial killings - those that allegedly involved the security forces.

The new unit within the police's Historical Enquiries Team (HET) will re-assess murders where there is suspicion of past collusion between soldiers, police officers and paramilitary gunmen.

The HET's "white team", under the authority of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, consists of highly experienced retired detectives. It is based in London and started work reviewing "cold cases" last week.

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The decision to establish a separate investigative force follows mounting political pressure to review killings where there are substantive claims of collusion, particularly between loyalists and the security forces.

The Northern Ireland Police Ombudsman, Nuala O'Loan, will today publish a report that is expected to be severely critical of special branch's use of Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) informers, suggesting they were protected and allowed to continue murdering. The Northern Ireland secretary, Peter Hain, said yesterday it would make uncomfortable reading.

At least three former detectives have been arrested during the three-year investigation - the largest ever carried out by the ombudsman's office.

The inquiry may even prove embarrassing for Sir Ronnie Flanagan, who was RUC chief constable at the time of the 1997 killing of Raymond McCord. A UVF gang was accused of killing McCord, a former RAF radar operator, whose murder triggered the ombudsman's inquiry. Sir Ronnie, a former head of special branch, is now Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary. He and Ms O'Loan clashed over the publication of her previous investigation into the Omagh bombing.

Her latest report will raise fresh concerns about how widespread collusion was within the security forces and how many of the province's notorious killers may have been police or army agents.

David Cox, the director of the HET, is no stranger to the subterfuge involved in handling informers. A former Metropolitan police commander, he is a veteran of successive inquiries by Sir John Stevens into the army's manipulation of loyalist paramilitary killers.

Last autumn Mr Cox gave evidence to an Irish parliamentary committee probing bombings and shootings in the republic during the 1970s, including those associated with the so-called "Glenanne gang" - a UVF unit operating out of a farm near Armagh that was alleged to have had help from police officers and soldiers. Irish officials at the time claimed four RUC officers were also in the UVF.

Killings by the Glenanne gang are among the first being investigated by the "white team".

The historical enquiries team has close links to the Police Ombudsman investigators. Both are also examining the 1993 killing of Sharon McKenna, 27, a Catholic taxi driver from Newtownabbey, who was shot by the UVF at the north Belfast home of an elderly friend where she had gone to make his dinner. The gunman was allegedly the same police informer who killed Raymond McCord.

Mr Cox said: "Where our inquiries or the allegations from the victim's family - which we can support - tend to show there's aspects ... we should look at from a collusion approach [we will].

"Rather than bottom up, it will be from top down ... who knew about this, was [somebody] giving guns to this group? You helicopter above it and look at the investigation again. The Glenanne cases will go to that team."

Mr Cox said he expected criminal charges as a result of the HET's work - examining all 3,268 killings related to the Troubles between 1968 and 1998 - over the next four years.

"I'm pretty sure there will be charges ... not a huge number," Mr Cox said.

"There's a feeling from the [victims'] families that even if people don't go to prison they want [perpetrators] to be held accountable," Mr Cox said. "But if I prosecute a soldier or a police officer, he could theoretically get life ... the Good Friday agreement only applies to paramilitaries. It's a big issue."

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