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Omagh: the questions that still need answering

12 August 2007 By Colm Heatley in Belfast

When the Real IRA exploded a 600lb bomb in Omagh on August 15, 1998, just months after the Good Friday Agreement was signed, it was as though the North had been dragged back to the darkest days of the Troubles.

The bomb exploded amid hundreds of shoppers in the centre of the town, killing 31 people and injuring more than 200 others.

But after nine years of trying to rebuild their lives, some of the victims' families claim that the British and Irish governments allowed the bomb to explode in a Machiavellian plot to end the armed campaign of dissident republicans.

In the aftermath of the atrocity, both Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and British prime minister Tony Blair assured the families that no stone would be left unturned in pursuit of those responsible.

At the time, the robust response was of some comfort to the injured and their families, but now some of those same victims say it is the governments who should be put on trial.

"I know this sounds strange, but even now I feel as though I'm going to wake up from a bad dream and Alan will walk in the door," said Marion Radford, whose 16-year-old son, Alan, was killed by the bomb.

"I'm still on anti-depressants. I can't cope without them. I just get so angry at times.

"I went everywhere with him, he was my best friend. On the day of the bomb, we had been shopping together in the town. I was just two shops away from where the car exploded. Alan had walked on ahead to see what was happening with the bomb scare when he was killed.

"Even today, I get panic attacks. Just a while back, I heard a bang and rang one of my daughters to see if she was okay. I still can't walk past the spot where the bomb exploded. I think the governments had a hand in the murders, and they need to answer our questions."

Motoring

Radford's views are echoed by other survivors, such as Kevin Skelton, whose wife, Philomena, was killed in the attack.

Agenda

Skelton, who helps run a self-help group for the Omagh victims, said he was "absolutely convinced that the two governments allowed the attack to go ahead".

Letters

Skelton was widowed at the age of 43 and left to bring up his four children, some of whom had been seriously injured in the attack. "Bloody Sunday started the Troubles as we know it then the Omagh bomb stopped them," he said.

People In Business

"It is as simple as that. "From the information we have gathered since 1998,we strongly believe that the two governments were happy to allow the bomb to go ahead and allow people to be killed. We know that they had advance warning and did nothing to stop it.

Budget Forum

"The bombing was part of a wider game, and the RIRA did the governments' dirty work for them. We need a full public cross-border inquiry."

Events / Conferences

Calls for the inquiry have been supported by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, as well as individual politicians in the North, including both Sinn Fein and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) members.

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What is known for sure about the Omagh bombing is that the Vauxhall car which carried the 600lb of explosives was stolen in Co Monaghan a week before the attack. Its southern registration plates were replaced with Northern ones and the car was parked on the street in Omagh.

Crossword

After the first warnings were telephoned to UTV and the Samaritans, the RUC police in Omagh wrongly moved people towards the bomb, believing that the courthouse at the other end of the town was the target. A subsequent Police Ombudsman's report was critical of the RUC investigation into the bombing.

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The report concluded that the RUC ignored warnings from agents, such as Kevin Fulton, that a dissident attack was imminent. Stung by the criticisms, the RUC's then chief constable, Ronnie Flanagan, went on television in the North to give a bizarre 'promise' that he would publicly commit suicide if the report's findings were upheld.

IMODE

It has since been uncovered that three agents working in the intelligence services in Ireland, England and the US had prior information about the attack.

RSS 

David Rupert, an FBI agent with a chequered past, who infiltrated the RIRA, was given a \$1 million indemnity arising from any case connected with the attack.

Text-Only

A key informant, who the Omagh victims believe has inside information, Rupert is living under a US government witness-protection scheme.

Likewise, Paddy Nixon, a car dealer who sourced cars for the RIRA, and who was a Garda informer, was subsequently placed under a witness-protection scheme.







Fulton, a long-time British agent who the Ombudsman said had given an important tip-off about Omagh prior to the attack, has been banned by the British government from speaking publicly about what he knows.

The Police Ombudsman found that Fulton's warning about the Omagh bomb was ignored by the RUC.

In a more worrying twist for the families, it emerged last year that an agent in the employ of both MI5 and the FBI knew of a plan to attack Omagh, but MI5 never passed this information to the RUC.



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However, the chief constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, Hugh Orde, has said that he doesn't believe that MI5 withheld the information.

Only one person in the Republic, Colm Murphy, has been charged with the Omagh bombing, but his conviction was overturned in 2005. Sean Hoey, a south Armagh electrician, is currently the only person to be charged in the North in connection with Omagh. A verdict in his case is expected in late September.

In such circumstances, a feeling of mistrust and suspicion has developed among many of the victims. They feel that if the governments didn't directly collude with the attack, they have done little to explain what they knew about the RIRA's plans before the bombing.

There is no argument but that the Omagh bomb stopped the dissident campaign in its tracks and effectively spelt the end of their violence in the North.

Likewise, after Omagh, it would have been extremely difficult for the IRA to have broken its ceasefire.

Francis Mackey was a senior spokesman for the RIRA aligned 32-County Sovereignty Committee at the time of the bombings. A former Sinn Fein Lord Mayor of Omagh, who lives just a few miles from the town, he defended the right of dissidents to carry out "armed actions" but condemned the attack.

At the time of the bombing, Mackey had left Sinn Fein because of its involvement in the peace process. His defence of dissident attacks, although he did condemn Omagh, left him isolated from the nationalist community. For some he became a figure of hate.

"What happened was wrong," he said. "But the 32County Sovereignty Committee's project is still strong." In reality, the public reaction to Omagh dealt a blow to the dissidents from which they have never recovered. They now command only a tiny fraction of nationalist support.

But that may be of little comfort to the victims coping with their individual grief, especially those who believe that their loved ones were killed as part of a wider dirty war.



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