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Local & National

Special Branch officers 'much to be proud of'

Monday, January 22, 2007

By David Gordon

Ex-special Branch officers linked to the Police Ombudsman investigation have strongly defended their actions and insisted they have "much to be proud of" from their careers.

In a joint statement, the group of former officers angrily denounced Nuala O'Loan over the long-running probe into informers within the north Belfast UVF.

They also challenged her to publicly name any of them she believes to have been guilty of wrongdoing. The identities of officers and police informants have been withheld from the published Ombudsman report.

A confidential version of the document, including the names of police officers and ex-informers, has gone to PSNI Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde and Secretary of State Peter Hain.

The hard-hitting statement from ex-Branch men was issued through a solicitor on behalf of the Northern Ireland Retired Police Officers' Association. It is understood the group includes former senior officers.

The statement said: "The ex-senior police officers criticised by the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland vigorously refute her allegations as unfounded and incapable of substantiation.

"It has therefore come as no surprise to them that there will be no prosecutions, although they deeply regret the damage she has caused to the reputation of many fine officers who were doing their duty on behalf of the community at great personal risk. These officers have nothing to be ashamed about and much to be proud of. Their actions, at great personal risk to themselves, have saved the lives of hundreds if not thousands of people."

The statement claimed that the Ombudsman's office had failed to grasp the "fundamental concept that allegations and intelligence are not evidence".

It also said that the investigation had removed any remaining "vestige of confidence" they held in the office of the Police Ombudsman.

And it challenged Mrs O'Loan not to conceal the identity of anyone "against whom she has found specific evidence of involvement in any offence".

The statement also slammed "orchestrated media hype" in advance of today's Ombudsman's report.

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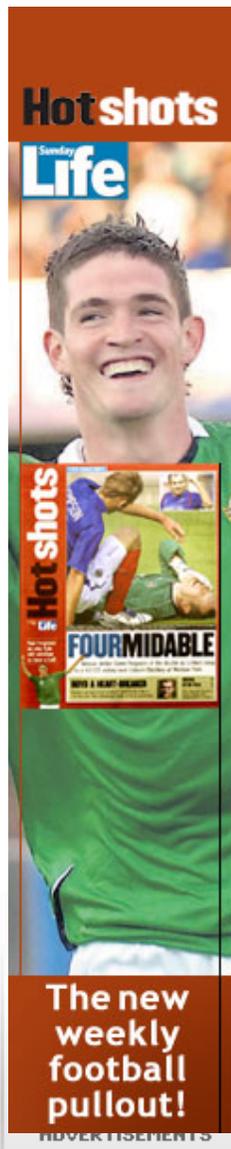
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