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Local & National

Ex-colleague defends Sir Ronnie over Omagh probe

Friday, January 25, 2008

By Deric Henderson

The detective who first exposed the Omagh police investigation fiasco last night defended Sir Ronnie Flanagan and blamed other retired officers for the bungled probe into the atrocity.

Ex-Chief Superintendent Brian McVicker said: "I believe these are the people who should be held to account."

His criticism of ex-colleagues followed an apology to victims' relatives by Sir Ronnie, the former RUC Chief Constable, over deficiencies in the inquiry.

But Mr McVicker, speaking publicly for the first time about the affair, insisted that other officers - all of them retired - were primarily responsible.

He said: "Sir Ronnie is taking the rap for Omagh as he must because he was in charge of the RUC at the time. He was the top layer of supervision, but there were others.

"They are just as much to blame as he is and they've escaped all the abuse and criticism Sir Ronnie is having to take. That is unfair."

Mr McVicker was called in by Sir Ronnie in March 2000 to carry out a full review of the first investigation of the August 1998 Real IRA bomb.

It was a devastating report which revealed serious shortcomings and a failure by officers to follow up inquires with people he believed to be key witnesses.

He also disclosed the loss of hundreds of documents and tensions between certain RUC officers and Garda detectives in the Republic who were involved in the investigation on their side of the border where the bomb was assembled.

It was the McVicker dossier which effectively formed the basis of a damning report prepared later by the then-Northern Ireland Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan. That report ended in a fierce row between her and Sir Ronnie who refused to resign when she accused him of defective leadership and poor judgment.

He retired from the RUC in March, 2002 and is now head of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary.

Mr McVicker later agreed to take charge of the Omagh investigation but walked away after he claimed he was not getting the proper resources he said he was promised to staff it. He retired in April 2002.

He said: "Of course Sir Ronnie had a responsibility to bring the bombers to justice. But in my view the greater responsibility for the success of the investigation lay with others.

"I do not believe he should resign from his present position. If there were shortcomings in the latest investigation, then you can't blame him for that."

Solicitor Victor Barker, whose son James was killed in Omagh, has demanded Sir Ronnie quit as Chief Inspector of the British Inspectorate of Constabulary.

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It followed the acquittal last month at a court in Belfast of Sean Hoey (39), from south Armagh, the only man charged with the 29 murders.

The trial judge Mr Justice Weir hit out at parts of the police investigation into Hoey. Two officers are being investigated for allegedly doctoring statements.

Sir Ronnie has insisted he will not resign his HMIC job, but did apologise to the families.

Michael Gallagher, whose son Aidan was also killed, said Sir Ronnie's apology was a positive step, but the victims families still wanted a full north-south judicial inquiry.

He added: "I think it is important people remember that there have been investigations into the Omagh bomb in Northern Ireland and the Republic for over nine and a half years.

"There have been serious failings at all levels on both sides of the border and the only way to address all these issues is through a comprehensive independent cross-border public inquiry rather than having them raised in a piecemeal fashion.

"Sir Ronnie is someone who could bring a lot of knowledge and help to an independent inquiry and I would hope he would freely go and open up."

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