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report**  
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## Claims security forces shielded informants in IRA to be investigated

- Ombudsman looking at incidents in 80s and 90s
- Police failure to act 'would be collusion if proved'

**Owen Bowcott, Ireland correspondent**  
**Saturday March 10, 2007**

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Allegations that the security forces protected IRA gunmen who were informants and failed to prevent murders are being investigated by the Northern Ireland police ombudsman.

At least six cases, dating back to the 1980s and 1990s, are being examined by Nuala O'Loan's office in Belfast. Several are understood to focus on the role of Freddie Scappaticci, the former head of the IRA's internal security unit, who has since been exposed as an army agent.

The cases are being investigated individually but may be rolled together if evidence emerges that they are linked.

The ombudsman's last report was a damning verdict on the way RUC special branch handled agents in a loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force unit. It said police failed to prevent up to 15 murders over 12 years.

Earlier this week a former special branch officer was arrested by the ombudsman's investigators, who are probing the 1984 IRA killing of a magistrate's daughter outside a church in the Malone area of south Belfast.

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Allegations have been made that special branch allowed the weapon used to be destroyed to protect their informant within the IRA.

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The family of John Dignam have also approached the ombudsman's office and asked for his death to be re-examined. Dignam, from County Armagh, was one of three IRA volunteers shot dead by the organisation's internal security department in 1992. The family claim they were killed in order to protect a more important informant in the IRA.

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"In some of these [cases] there are suggestions that people were protected by the police from arrest and prosecution," Mrs O'Loan told BBC Radio yesterday. "On the republican side the allegation was that there was protection of republican criminals and there was in some cases [protection of] a republican informant."

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The allegations involved "police failure to investigate [and that] police knew the murder was going to happen and did nothing about it", she said. "If what is being alleged transpires to be the truth that would be collusion."

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Another family wants the ombudsman to investigate a similar murder. Sharon Murtagh, whose father, Anthony McKernan, was killed by the IRA in 1988, has called for the case to be reopened.

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Speaking on BBC Radio Ulster yesterday, she said her father was shot four times in the head after he left their home in the Markets area of Belfast to meet Mr Scappaticci. "It would have been in the British interest to take my father out because my father was a member of the IRA. He had done jail, he was on the run, he was an alleged bomb maker, although he was never charged with anything in connection with explosions.

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"My father was not an informer but we were [branded] the family of a 'tout'."

Freddie Scappaticci has repeatedly denied working as an agent. He has left Belfast and is thought to be living in Italy.

It is not known whether the ombudsman's officers have sought to interview Mr Scappaticci. The investigators have already talked to police officers and are due to contact the army and intelligence services about the cases.

The Police Federation for Northern Ireland has repudiated claims that officers betrayed the community's trust. In a response to Mrs O'Loan's report on the handling of informants within the UVF, it said those who believed informants were people with clean hands were "living in Utopia". It added: "Informants by definition have to be on the inside of organisations. If they are involved in criminally-minded or terrorist-directed organisations they must be both active and preferably, to be of value, of some seniority. The Police Ombudsman's Office is quite clearly incapable of grasping that."

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