

Brutal murder revives paramilitary fears in border 'bandit country'

Sinn Fein moves to condemn killing that has shaken the Stormont administration

By David McKittrick
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A savage murder at a remote Irish border farm last week shook Northern Ireland's fledgling administration. The family of 21-year-old Paul Quinn, battered to death, pointed the finger at the IRA, saying he had fallen foul of members of the organisation after having clashes with two republicans.

Security sources say the brutal but carefully planned killing, involving at least nine men, was the work of former IRA members acting without the organisation's sanction.

The family's allegation of IRA responsibility was daring. After decades of IRA domination of the south Armagh-Monaghan border, most in conflict with the IRA there keep prudently silent.

The accusation from the Quinn family endangered the very existence of the Stormont administration jointly headed by the Rev Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein.

Mr Paisley and his Democratic Unionist Party went into government with republicans on the strict understanding that the IRA had ended all activities. He has since publicly placed much trust in Sinn Fein.

When the news of the killing broke, Mr Paisley made contact with London, Dublin and Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde. The Irish Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, also moved rapidly since the incident took place in his jurisdiction on the southern side of the border.

Both police forces were quick to say that they had no evidence that the killing had been sanctioned by the IRA. But police in the Irish Republic, in particular, made no secret of their intelligence that formerly prominent IRA personnel had killed Paul Quinn.

Mr McGuinness and Gerry Adams of Sinn Fein issued strong statements condemning the killing and calling on anyone with information to help police on both sides of the border. Their statements seemed to carry political force despite the widespread belief that in the past republicans have not told the truth about IRA violence.

According to locals and security sources, Quinn had two recent brushes with republicans around the Cullyhanna area where he lived, and had been ordered to leave the district. A local teacher described him as "a bit of a wide boy, a hard man". Another described him as "a hard man, very headstrong", though his family is regarded as moderate and very respectable.

Neighbours and others, however, believe that Paul Quinn was involved in

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illegality as a member of a gang smuggling diesel fuel across the border. The belief is that former IRA figures in this hardline area set out last weekend to demonstrate that, while the IRA may be inactive as an organisation, republicans will not tolerate "disrespect".

A week last Saturday, Quinn was lured to a farm shed by a telephone call. When he arrived he was seized by a large group of men who methodically used iron bars to beat him to a pulp. The conclusion of the post-mortem examination was that he died of "blunt force trauma", suffering a broken arm and leg with internal injuries to his brain and lungs.

The gang did not kill him at the scene, and when police arrived he was both conscious and lucid. The south Armagh tradition of "omerta" is so strong that he refused to tell police who had assaulted him. He died later that evening in hospital. While opinions vary locally on whether the gang intended to kill him or not, the scale of his multiple injuries suggests they did not particularly care whether he lived or died.

Mr Adams said: "The people involved are criminals. They need to be brought to justice and it is fairly obvious to me that this is linked to fuel smuggling and to criminal activity. There's no republican involvement whatsoever in this man's murder."

The killing is a disturbing development when paramilitary activities had fast been declining in south Armagh, an area that a British minister once christened "bandit country". Recent violent events demonstrate that the bandits have not gone away.

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