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Tuesday, December 2, 2008

Murder inquiry told Nelson was IRA 'terrorist'



Rosemary Nelson: solicitor died when a bomb exploded under her car in March 1999

GERRY MORIARTY, Northern Editor

THE INQUIRY into the murder of Rosemary Nelson has been told the solicitor was an IRA "terrorist" who had an affair with one of her clients, Colin Duffy. Mr Duffy was described to the inquiry as a prominent IRA figure in Lurgan.

A transcript of the evidence, which was given last week by a former head of the RUC Special Branch, was published yesterday on the inquiry's website.

The inquiry is investigating the March 1999 loyalist murder of the 40-year-old solicitor and it was established as a result of allegations of official collusion in her murder. It was told by the former Special Branch witness that Ms Nelson had a close association with the IRA in Lurgan, particularly with Mr Duffy.

Mr Duffy had served three years on a charge of murdering a UDR soldier but was freed in 1996 as the conviction was quashed by the appeal court. He was also charged with the June 1997 IRA murders of community police officers John Graham and David Johnston in Lurgan. These charges were dropped in October 1997.

He has left the mainstream republican movement and is now a member of the Eirigi republican group, which opposes the powersharing Stormont administration.

Fellow member Breandan Mac Cionnaith said in a statement issued last night said the allegations made about Ms Nelson and Mr Duffy were "unchallengeable and unsubstantiated". He complained of "salacious" and "unfounded, unproven and unsubstantiated allegations"

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from members of the RUC.

Under the terms of the inquiry the Nelson family's legal representative cannot cross-examine the witnesses. Barra McGrory, the family's solicitor, said in a statement issued to the media that there was no "evidential basis" for the allegations.

The former Special Branch witness, who was granted anonymity by the inquiry, said that the intelligence at the time of her death was that her killers had three targets in mind initially: Mr Duffy and Mr Mac Cionnaith - both of whom the solicitor represented - and Ms Nelson and that she was killed because she was the "easiest of the three targets".

In his evidence last week the ex-Special Branch officer said the intelligence at the time was that Ms Nelson provided intelligence back to Mr Duffy, that she assisted him in the "furtherance of his own objectives" and that police held the view that she was "involved in these criminal matters".

He said the intelligence also was that Ms Nelson had a "romantic" relationship with Mr Duffy and that this information was known at senior levels of the RUC including by the then chief constable Sir Ronnie Flanagan.

The ex-RUC officer also spoke of how he had said in a statement that "it would not have surprised me if in fact the murder of Mrs Nelson was a republican bombing posing as a loyalist bombing to destabilise the peace process".

He said this at the time because they were struggling to establish who was responsible and this was one of a number of theories that were being examined.

The witness said he saw "absolutely" no evidence that Ms Nelson was murdered as a result of collusion involving the RUC, its Special Branch or "other security forces".

Former senior Northern Ireland civil servant David Watkins, also in evidence last week, spoke of how he had met Ms Nelson during "proximity talks" between the Garvaghy residents and the Orange Order.

He was aware of the claims against her and of her allegedly having an affair with Mr Duffy. "I remember saying to myself I have no evidence that those allegations, those attempts to impugn her, were true because I realised that I might have to deal with this person quite frequently and I did not want to have that baggage in my mind in doing so," he said.

Mr Watkins also spoke of a meeting with the then chief constable Sir Ronnie Flanagan. When asked how Sir Ronnie described Ms Nelson he replied, "I think he used the term 'an immoral woman'."

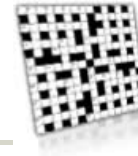


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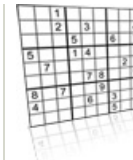
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