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Last Updated: 15/04/2008 13:59

## Nelson murder inquiry opens in Belfast

[Gerry Mortiarty](#)

The inquiry into the murder of solicitor Rosemary Nelson opened today declaring its intentions to investigate allegations that the British state colluded in the murder of one of its own citizens.

The independent investigation into the circumstances surrounding the murder of the solicitor.

Mrs Nelson (40), a mother of three, who was killed in a car bomb at her home in Lurgan on March 15th, 1999 had alleged police harassment prior to her death. The bomb was claimed by the loyalist paramilitary group the Red Hand Defenders.

Counsel for the inquiry, Rory Phillips QC, began proceedings today with an opening statement charting the way forward for the three-member inquiry team.

“On your behalf it will be our task over the months of these hearings to investigate and probe these and other matters which include very troubling suggestions, at their highest of state involvement in the murder of one of the state’s own citizens, in a dispassionate and calm way so that the truth is not itself obscured by emotion, preconception or prejudice,” he said.

Mrs Nelson’s husband Paul, her mother and her brothers and sisters, were present for the opening day of the inquiry, which is being held in the Interpoint Centre in central Belfast.

They sat behind the rows of lawyers representing parties to the inquiry, including representatives of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), Northern Ireland Office (NIO), army and British intelligence service MI5.

The inquiry follows a lengthy police investigation which failed to convict anyone in connection with Mrs Nelson’s murder.

Ms Nelson was a high-profile lawyer who came to public prominence when she represented Garvaghy Road residents during the Drumcree stand-offs in the mid-to late-1990s.

Ms Nelson complained that she was subjected to RUC harassment and that police told some of her clients that she would be murdered.

Mrs Nelson had told representatives of the US Congress and the United Nations that her life was being threatened by members of the RUC. In 1998 then United Nations investigator Param Cumaraswamy complained about the alleged harassment to the UN in Geneva and to the British government.

Although the allegations were denied by police, they fuelled speculation of a wider conspiracy against Mrs Nelson in the aftermath of her murder.

“At the time of her murder there was a perception, that has persisted to this day, that she was killed for her work [as a solicitor],” Mr Phillips said.

“An important characteristic of a free democratic society governed according to law, is the presence within it of lawyers who are willing and able to take up the cause of those charged with offences, however grave they may be and however repellent the nature of the conduct alleged,” he said.

“And to represent them fearlessly and to the best of their ability whatever society’s view of their clients.”

Mr Phillips drew comparisons with the loyalist murder in 1989 of solicitor Pat Finucane, which has also stirred allegations of security force collusion.

Mr Phillips added that Mrs Nelson’s allegations of threats prior to her death and their airing on the world stage had set her case apart.

“Suffice to say at this point that the striking and possibly unique feature of her murder was that the fact

of it, if not the manner of it, had apparently been so clearly foreshadowed, not least by her," he said.

Mr Phillips' opening statement on the case is expected to last at least three days, while the first witnesses are expected by the end of the month.

The inquiry members are its chairman, Sir Michael Morland, a retired high court judge of England and Wales; Dame Valerie Strachan, former chairwoman of the British customs and excise board, and Sir Anthony Burden, former chief constable of South Wales Police.

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