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O'Loan to probe PSNI murder investigation

22 October 2006 By Barry McCaffrey

The North's Police Ombudsman, Nuala O'Loan, is to investigate claims that the PSNI failed to arrest loyalists suspected of murdering a Belfast teenager, the last Catholic to be shot dead by loyalists during the Troubles, even though they were identified by two eyewitnesses.

The parents of Gerard Lawlor last week asked O'Loan to examine if their son's murder was properly investigated. They believe the original PSNI inquiry was "seriously flawed" and may have been obstructed to protect police informers.

The 19-year-old was shot dead by two gunmen on a moped as he walked home from a north Belfast bar in July 2002. The murder was the fourth UDA shooting in north Belfast that night, following a dissident republican gun attack on a Protestant teenager earlier in the day.

The motorbike was later found at the home of a relative of one of the main suspects. Less than 24 hours after Lawlor's murder, a masked UDA man claimed that the killing had been a "measured military response" to the INLA gun attack on a Protestant in north Belfast.

DUP MP Nigel Dodds broke down in tears when visiting the teenager's parents. The talented hurler was the fifth member of the local St Enda's GAA club to be killed during the Troubles.

More than 5,000 people took part in a peace vigil following Lawlor's murder. In August 2003, two men were questioned about the murder, but were later released without charge.

For three years, Lawlor's parents, John and Sharon, supported the police but, over the last 18 months, they have come to believe that there was never any serious effort made to apprehend their son's killers.

Among their concerns is evidence that a telephone call was made to the PSNI's confidential telephone line days after the murder identifying a well-known UDA man, who visited the Bellevue Bar several times in the week before the shooting.

The loyalist fled to England in 2003 after an internal UDA feud, but was later jailed for trying to sell heroin and crack cocaine to undercover police officers. Police told the Lawlors that the motorbike used by the killers was found at a house in nearby Newtownabbey, but that it had been impossible to obtain forensic evidence, as it had been burned.

It has now emerged that a female PSNI officer identified one of the suspects from a police photofit, but was not asked to attend any ID parade. It has also emerged that a witness identified only as X telephoned the confidential police line days after the murder, identifying two loyalists who, X claimed, confessed to the murder several hours after the attack. After hearing nothing for four years, X approached police earlier this summer and gave a statement identifying the two suspects.

The witness is also understood to have offered to give evidence at any trial. However, the Lawlor family say that police have refused to investigate the witness's claims in the absence of fresh corroborating evidence.

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