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Special Branch officers will get away with collusion

(by Suzanne Breen, *Sunday Tribune*)

Special Branch officers guilty of collusion in loyalist murders in the North are unlikely to be prosecuted despite the Police Ombudsman's explosive report which will be published tomorrow, sources have told the *Sunday Tribune*.

Nuala O'Loan will state that the handlers of UVF informers, and their superiors, turned a blind eye to over a dozen killings by the UVF's unit in Mount Vernon, north Belfast.

While the report will lead to the re-opening of 10-20 murder cases, the prosecution of Special Branch officers is unlikely because vital intelligence documents have gone missing.

It is believed these documents were destroyed by detectives to protect themselves. While O'Loan has proved a case of collusion which "defies any legitimate legal explanation", the intelligence papers would be vital for a successful prosecution.

The ombudsman's investigation began with the murder of Raymond McCord jnr, 22, but was extended to cover other killings by the Mount Vernon UVF.

Raymond McCord snr, the victim's father, said a public inquiry must be held. "It's up to our politicians to have the courage to support this, particularly unionist ones who so far have an abysmal record in tackling collusion. I want to see informers, and their handlers, put behind bars for what happened to my son and others."

McCord jnr was beaten to death in 1997 on the orders of informer Mark Haddock, the UVF's Mount Vernon OC. Haddock will not be named in the report but will be referred to as 'Agent I'. The identity of other informers and their handlers will also be protected.

At key points in their investigation, O'Loan's officers found the paper trail cleverly disrupted. They would go so far, then meet a gap in intelligence documents. However, in most cases, they were able to bridge this through other material.

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Only half O'Loan's 200-page report will be made public but the full document has already been handed to PSNI Chief Constable, Sir Hugh Orde, and Northern Secretary, Peter Hain.

Many of the murders happened when Sir Ronnie Flanagan was Chief Constable. O'Loan's report will credit Orde for changes he has initiated in intelligence-gathering. One source told the *Sunday Tribune* that most, if not all, the Special Branch officers involved had since left the force.

Even without the missing documents, the chances of prosecution of these officers seemed slim. The Public Prosecution Service has failed to recommend a single charge against security force members Lord Stevens accused of collusion in his report four years ago.

O'Loan's preliminary report on the McCord investigation, sent to the Director of Public Prosecutions, Sir Alasdair Frazer, last year, has also failed to result in action. The SDLP will be raising this with the Attorney General.

Raymond McCord snr will this week meet Geraldine Finucane, whose husband Pat was also a victim of collusion.

January 21, 2007

This article appeared in the January 21, 2007 edition of the [Sunday Tribune](#).

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