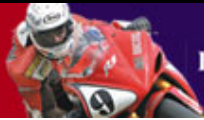


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Local & National

MI5 will weaken Ombudsman's powers: O'Loan

Monday, July 02, 2007

By Jonathan McCambridge

Northern Ireland's outgoing Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan has warned that the powers of the Ombudsman's office will be severely reduced when MI5 takes control of Northern Ireland's national security.

In an interview with The Observer newspaper, Mrs O'Loan reflected on her eight years in the job and delivered a warning to UK police forces battling the threat of terrorism: do not let agents break the law to increase intelligence capabilities.

In November, Mrs O'Loan will be replaced by Al Hutchinson, a former Canadian RCMP officer whose most recent job was Oversight Commissioner for Policing Reform in Northern Ireland.

By then, MI5 will have assumed responsibility for intelligence gathering on national security from the PSNI, including international terrorist threats and terrorist activities within Northern Ireland.

Mrs O'Loan said: "There will be a reduction in this office's ability to call people to account. The current situation gives me powers that enable me to examine information intelligence and records.

"Soon, I won't have that amount of access to information. The security services may co-operate with me and we are working towards a protocol that says they won't withhold information.






"But there is a huge difference between that and me having statutory powers to, for example, trawl through police computers and dig and dig until I find something. We won't be able to do that with MI5.

"If you have got constables and sergeants handling people who are reporting to the security services, then I can ask the constables and sergeants to account for themselves.

"However, I can't question the security services about any alleged wrongdoing."

The Ombudsman also had a warning for British security services battling Islamic terror organisations. She says they must learn from Northern Ireland.

"My concern is that, if we have to learn anything from Northern Ireland, it is that we mustn't allow a situation to develop in places like Bradford, Manchester or London, where you allow communities to become so disconnected from the police and security services - because they can see people being allowed to commit crime, and very often serious crime - (and) they stop giving the authorities the information they need."

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