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Human bomb among cases in ombudsman's collusion probe

(Liz Trainor, [Irish News](#))

The Police Ombudsman is about to launch an inquiry into claims that human-car-bomb victim Patsy Gillespie was sacrificed to protect a British agent in the IRA.

The murder, which caused widespread revulsion, was one of the worst acts carried out by the IRA during their bloody 30-year-long campaign.

The case is believed to be just one of six incidents that the ombudsman's office will investigate amid claims that security services – including RUC Special Branch – protected informers within the IRA from prosecution.

The move comes amid claims that to ensure that agents remained trusted by the IRA they were allowed to take part in murders and other operations with impunity.

Any hint of wrong-doing by the security services in the Gillespie murder could have far-reaching consequences for the British government, particularly if Mrs O'Loan's office finds that senior security sources knew of the human-bomb plot and allowed it to ahead.

Lobby group British-Irish Rights Watch has already claimed that British security services masterminded the human-bomb strategy which killed Mr Gillespie, a civilian security base worker, and six soldiers in 1990 in a lethal strategy in which workers were forced to drive explosives into army facilities.

Investigators are also expected to open the case of a British soldier shot dead along the Derry/Donegal border although few details have emerged about the case.

Freddie Scappaticci, believed to be the police informer codenamed Stakeknife, is expected to be at the centre of the ombudsman's probe.

Investigators from Mrs O'Loan's office are keen to delve into Scappaticci's role as head of one of the IRA's notorious internal security unit responsible for murdering informers.

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The ombudsman's office will investigate claims that three IRA members killed by the unit in July 1992 were killed to protect an agent.

Gregory Burns, John Dignam and Aidan Starrs were shot and their bodies dumped on the south Armagh border.

After having been missing from their homes for several days the men's bodies were discovered within a 10-mile radius of each other. They were naked and each had been shot twice in the head.

The IRA claimed the three men had been killed because they were involved in the murder of Burns's girlfriend, Margaret Perry, after she discovered Burns was an informer.

In a second statement, the Provisionals claimed that after Starrs and Dignam were arrested by the RUC over Ms Perry's murder, they turned informer for Special Branch.

The ombudsman's office is also known to be stepping up its investigation into the murder of Mary Travers, daughter of retired Belfast magistrate Tom Travers.

The case hit the headlines on Thursday after it emerged that a former Special Branch officer, who spoke to the ombudsman when the enquiry was opened four years ago, was arrested.

The case of murdered Newry IPLO man Eoin Morley is also to be put under an intense spotlight.

The move comes after an earlier ombudsman's report found that Special Branch withheld crucial information from detectives investigating the murder.

The RUC had built up high-grade intelligence on those suspected of plotting Mr Morley's shooting but Mrs O'Loan discovered that no-one was ever arrested.

It is also known that one of the cases that the ombudsman has already looked at in relation to IRA-security force collusion is that of Lance Bombardier Stephen Restorick, who was the last soldier to be shot dead in Northern Ireland.

His mother Rita launched a campaign to get to the bottom of his murder amid claims that his killing was allowed to go ahead to protect an informer in the IRA.

The ombudsman's office has since ruled out any foul play in the murder.

Speaking yesterday Mrs O'Loan said: "On the republican

side the allegations are that there was protection of republican criminals. And in some cases the suggestion is that there was a republican informant involved."

Investigators have already been in touch with the police and will soon be contacting the army and intelligence agencies.

Meanwhile, the family of a Belfast IRA man murdered as an informer have vowed to take their case up with the ombudsmans in a bid to clear his name.

Anthony McKiernan's daughter Sharon Murtagh said it was the only way to finally get her father's name cleared.

The family have claimed McKiernan had been due to meet Freddie Scappaticci – then said to be second-in-command of IRA internal security and a Special Branch agent – hours before he was shot in the head.

McKiernan, from the Markets area of south Belfast, was last seen on January 18 1988. Less than 24 hours later the body of the 44-year-old, who had been in the IRA for more than 15 years, was found dumped in the Beechmount area of west Belfast.

The Provisionals claimed he had been on the payroll of Special Branch, an alleged confession sealing his fate.

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