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Royal Ulster Constabulary police officers examine the scene where two men were found shot dead near the village of Tandragree in County Armagh in this February 19, 2000 file photo. Top officers within Northern Ireland's police force allowed Protestant paramilitary informers to carry out murders for more than a decade, a report by the British-ruled province's police ombudsman said on Monday. REUTERS/Paul McErlane

N.Irish police colluded with killers, report says

BELFAST (Reuters) - Top officers within Northern Ireland's police force allowed Protestant paramilitary informers to carry out murders for more than a decade, a report by the province's police ombudsman said on Monday.

The report, which details findings from a three-year probe, says Special Branch officers turned a blind eye to the criminal activities of a unit of the outlawed Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in order to protect "agents" within its ranks.

Between 1991 and 2003 members of the Belfast-based UVF gang killed 10 people, including a Presbyterian minister and a Roman Catholic taxi driver, and were linked to a catalogue of other crimes including shootings, drug dealing and extortion.

"It would be easy to blame the junior officers' conduct in dealing with various informants and indeed they are not blameless," Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan said in a statement.

"However, they could not have operated as they did without the knowledge and support at the highest levels of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)."

The PSNI replaced the RUC in 2001 as part of policing reforms under a 1998 peace deal to end 30 years of bloodshed between majority Protestants who want to retain links with Britain and a Catholic minority in favour of a united Ireland.

The Protestant-dominated force was dogged by allegations of collusion with paramilitaries throughout the province's conflict, accusations that extended to spy service, MI5.



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O'Loan has sent a file to PSNI Chief Constable Hugh Orde naming senior Special Branch officers and their UVF informers but the province's director of public prosecutions has already indicated charges will not be brought.

O'Loan's report, which stemmed from an inquiry into the UVF murder in 1997 of 22-year-old Protestant Raymond McCord, said her office had been hampered by missing documents, which had prevented officers from being held to account.

While the inquiry had been "difficult and at times very sad" O'Loan said she was satisfied the PSNI "had accepted the mistakes of the past and put in place policies and procedures to help ensure they will not happen again".

The report comes as the province's main nationalist party, Sinn Fein, gears up to decide whether to support the PSNI -- a key demand of unionist opponents before a Protestant - Catholic power sharing assembly can be restored in Belfast.

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