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Northern Ireland: Prominent human rights lawyer killed

Amnesty International is shocked and deeply saddened by the killing today of a human rights defender in Northern Ireland. Rosemary Nelson, a prominent lawyer, died today from injuries sustained in the explosion of a booby trap bomb planted under her car. No group has yet claimed responsibility for her killing.

Rosemary Nelson gained prominence for her defence of individuals detained under emergency legislation in the context of the political violence in Northern Ireland. In recent years she lodged complaints with international and national human rights organizations as well as the authorities that she was subject intimidation by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the Royal Irish Regiment (RIR), and received anonymous death threats.

Her allegations were recently investigated by a senior officer from the (London) Metropolitan Police, after the Independent Commission for Police Complaints reportedly found the initial investigation by the RUC unsatisfactory.

Earlier today Rosemary Nelson had raised concerns about the failure by police to uphold "the rule of law" in protecting her clients, residents of the Garvaghy Road in Portadown, from the systematic intimidation and violence which has continued to erupt since a Protestant Orange Order march was

re-routed away from this predominantly Catholic neighbourhood last summer.

Rosemary Nelson is the second lawyer to have been killed in the last 10 years in Northern Ireland. In February 1989 Patrick Finucane was shot dead by the Ulster Freedom Fighters, a Loyalist paramilitary group, allegedly in collusion with members of the security forces.

“As dedicated human rights advocates, they were relentless in their pursuit of the maintenance of the rule of law and outspoken in their criticism of human rights violations,” Amnesty International said.

Concern about systematic intimidation and harassment of lawyers in Northern Ireland has been raised for years by non-governmental organizations, including Amnesty International. In a report published in April 1998, the UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers echoed these concerns. He concluded that there was “intimidation and harassment” of lawyers and called for an independent investigation into these practices by the RUC.

The UN Special Rapporteur also recommended that “where there is a threat to the physical integrity of a solicitor or barrister, irrespective from whom the threat emanates, the Government should provide the necessary protection and should vigorously investigate the threats and bring to justice the guilty party”.

“Had these recommendations been promptly implemented, this tragedy might have been averted,” Amnesty International said.

The organization is calling on the government to take the following measures without further delay:

** institute a thorough and impartial inquiry into the killing of Rosemary Nelson. Amnesty International considers that, given the circumstances, the RUC would not be considered impartial;*

** institute an independent judicial inquiry into allegations that defence lawyers are systematically harassed and intimidated by the security forces;*

** urgently implement the Special Rapporteur's recommendation for an independent inquiry into the killing of Patrick Finucane.*

“The memory of Rosemary Nelson, the protection of lawyers in Northern Ireland, and the upholding of the rule of law demand no less,” Amnesty International said.

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