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Flanagan denies there was a conspiracy to murder Billy Wright



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DAN KEENAN, Northern News Editor

FORMER CHIEF constable Sir Ronnie Flanagan has emphatically denied there was a conspiracy to murder loyalist leader Billy Wright at the Maze prison in 1997.

Asked by the inquiry established to examine the controversial killing by the INLA if there was any such conspiracy, Sir Ronnie said: "Absolutely not."

Asked if he was involved in any conspiracy involving Wright, he repeated: "Absolutely not."

Sir Ronnie was being questioned about the murder because he headed the RUC at the time of the murder and was also a one-time head of RUC Special Branch.

The inquiry is keen to establish an intelligence picture about Wright, especially in relation to the severe unrest provoked by Drumcree after 1996, and about the INLA's intentions to murder him.

Sir Ronnie was questioned about allegations contained in a book, *The Billy Boy* by Chris Anderson, in which it was suggested a meeting about the Drumcree standoff had been held involving the Orange Order and a senior RUC officer.

The officer is alleged to have said that Billy Wright was part of the problem in 1996, but would not be in 1997.

Admitting he regularly met senior Orange figures in relation to the Drumcree situation, Sir Ronnie denied any knowledge of this particular meeting.

He told the inquiry it would be "outrageous to ascribe a sinister connotation to any comment supposedly attributed to me in the context of the murder of Billy Wright".

Much of the questioning faced by Sir Ronnie in more than two hours of testimony centred on a security service document which alleged that Wright posed a threat to political developments in the wake of the loyalist and republican ceasefires. This document, prepared some eight months before Wright was shot dead by INLA prisoners within the Maze prison, said the Loyalist Volunteer Force leader was capable of inflicting damage on the peace process.

However, Sir Ronnie dismissed this assessment. Describing Wright as the leader of a small but dangerous loyalist faction, he said he was "not pivotal in what was described as a peace process".

He also denied having seen such intelligence concerning Wright and the emerging peace process.

Other questions referred to the transfer of Wright from Maghaberry prison to one of the H-blocks at the Maze prison where INLA prisoners were also being held.

Sir Ronnie said he was not consulted about the transfer and insisted he would not have had a hand in government policy on such an issue.

It was "a preposterous suggestion" that the state, the intelligence service and others arranged or sponsored any moves to have Wright murdered, he said.

Sir Ronnie continues his testimony later this morning.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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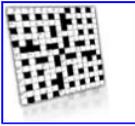
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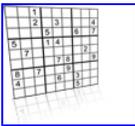
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