

News

Codewords that prove terrorists are the real thing

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It was a move by the IRA which broke its own precedent. When the terrorists gave a coded warning before last week's Wilmslow bombings it was supplied to an elderly woman seemingly picked out at random.

Until now, the IRA tended to issue their warnings directly to the police or media organisations. Mervyn Jones, the Chief Constable of Cheshire, whose force dealt with the Wilmslow incident, said he was "amazed" at this new tactic. The anti terrorist branch at Scotland Yard were left scratching their heads as to why the Provos did what they did. And everyone was relieved that the lady had the sense to take the warning seriously.

The use of codewords is essential for the police if they are to save lives before a bomb explodes. But the police need to be sure the codes are being used by "genuine" terrorists, rather than cranks and time-wasters.

The procedure has been long established. The codes change periodically by agreement between the Provisionals and the security forces: both sides realise that a failure of communications would be catastrophic.



The chosen name is given by a member of the IRA to the Gardai in Dublin. They in turn pass it on to the RUC Special Branch in Belfast, and from there it is disseminated to forces on the mainland. Liaison is also held with a number of news organisations.

Things are much more complicated in Northern Ireland. There the IRA are not the only bombers. Because of the sheer number of factions, anything up to half dozen codenames could be in use at a given time.

