

GSOC under high-tech surveillance

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THE Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission (GSOC) was targeted as part of a sophisticated surveillance operation which used "government-level technology" to hack into its emails, wi-fi and phone systems.

The espionage was uncovered last year after GSOC hired a British security consultancy to investigate whether its headquarters in Abbey Street, Dublin, and its internal communications system were bugged.

The consultants, among them former counter-surveillance specialists with Britain's GCHQ spying agency, found a speaker phone on the upper floor of the GSOC building was bugged. The room was regularly used to hold case conferences on sensitive investigations. A test of the line confirmed the phone was being used to eavesdrop on meetings, according to sources.

The investigation also found that those responsible for the surveillance had compromised GSOC's wi-fi network in order to steal emails, data, confidential reports and pos-

sibly eavesdrop on mobile phone calls. The US National Security Agency (NSA) has used this technique to spy on targets in the past.

Investigators discovered that a second wi-fi system had been created to harvest GSOC data. It was operated using an IP address in Britain, which electronically concealed the identities and whereabouts of those spying on the garda watchdog, say sources.

Another device, which worked off GSOC's broadband network, was also found to have been compromised. However, it was wiped of all data by those involved in the spying operation, known in security circles as a "black operation", when it became clear their activities had been detected.

The surveillance appears to have been organised after Alan Shatter, the justice minister, appointed Simon

O'Brien, Kieran Fitzgerald and Carmel Foley to lead the garda watchdog in December 2011.

It is not clear if mobile phones and computers used by the three commissioners were specifically targeted but this is suspected to be the case. The duration of the espionage

could not be established by the investigators.

A report prepared for the three-person commission found there were specific indicators to prove it was being targeted using controlled technology, which is not commercially available or sold to non-government agencies.

GSOC took the decision to "integrity test" its communications network last summer after concerns were raised about internal security. The Sunday Times is unable to reveal what prompted the concerns for legal reasons.

The commission sought aid from the British Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), a sister organisation with counter-surveillance

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GSOC surveillance fears

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»» systems in place. The IPCC recommended that it use the services of a private security firm run by former members of Britain's military and security services, agencies which use state of the art technology to spy on foreign governments, terror groups and criminals.

The security company carried out its work at night to ensure the investigation wasn't compromised by GSOC staff.

Specialist counter-surveillance and telecommunications equipment was secretly shipped to Dublin to "integrity test" the garda watchdog's communications system as part of the inquiry.

GSOC is said to have spent €50,000 on the investigation and has now stepped up internal security measures.

The commission, which is chaired by O'Brien, a former police officer in London, is said to have "suspicions" as to who was responsible but no hard evidence.

Details of what happened were withheld from the Department of Justice and Garda Headquarters as the spying techniques used to mount the surveillance had left no clues which could categorically identify those involved.

The garda watchdog has now introduced new security systems, while the commission has created a "clean room" which cannot be

monitored by surveillance covert devices to hold case conferences.

The disclosure that GSOC was targeted is likely to cause concern at the highest level of government and civil rights groups. The commission investigated allegations of collusion

between gardai and Kieran Boylan, an international drug dealer. It is currently investigating the cancellation of penalty points by senior gardai.

The gardai, customs and military are permitted to use intrusive surveillance techniques to spy on people involved in organised crime and terrorism, but only for legitimate reasons and if permitted to do so by a judge.

Telephone intercepts require ministerial approval which must set out the reasons for the surveillance.

Senior security and military sources last night said that no government agency would mount surveillance on another. Other security sources said it would be impossible for a private individual to organise such surveillance.

The commission refused to comment.