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British Intelligence PC Stolen

Reuters

1:15 p.m. Mar. 24, 2000 PST

British police said Friday that they were hunting for a thief who stole a secret service computer containing information on Northern Ireland.

The laptop computer was snatched while an employee of Britain's domestic Security Service, known as MI-5, was buying a ticket at London's Paddington train station.

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"I can confirm that a laptop computer was stolen from the security service employee on March 4 at Paddington underground (station)," said a government official, who declined to be identified.

"The information contained in the laptop was well-protected and we believe it to be secure. We are not prepared to discuss the nature of the material," the official said.

The information on the computer was understood to be heavily encrypted and was related to the situation in Northern Ireland, but did not refer to the state of the peace process or any guerrilla threat.

The Northern Ireland peace process is in crisis following last month's decision by Britain to suspend a fledgling home-rule government over lack of progress on disarmament by Irish Republican Army guerrillas.

The IRA and their foes in the major Protestant guerrilla groups are sticking to ceasefires in the British province, but violence has persisted in the shape of punishment beatings and attempted bomb attacks on two security force bases.

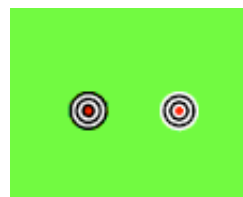
Much of it is blamed on splinter groups

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much of it is blamed on splinter groups.

A Home Office spokeswoman declined to comment on the theft.

Britain's top-selling *Sun* tabloid said Prime Minister Tony Blair and Home Secretary Jack Straw had been told of the theft, and that a squad of 150 police and Special Branch officers were working around the clock to catch the thief.



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