OVER TO YOU We love to receive pictures from our readers, whether they be of weddings, birthday parties, local scenes or whatever you think deserves a wide audience. Please email them (with full caption information) to: **editorial@limerickleader.ie**

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Limerick criminals arrested over Belfast murder

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TWO males with strong connections to organised crime in Limerick who were being questioned in relation to the murder of Robbie Lawlor in Belfast have been released without charge.

The pair – aged 33 and 17 – were arrested along with another man a number of hours after the fatal shooting at the weekend.

All three men were detained and questioned by detectives from the Police Service of Northern Ireland who are investigating the brutal murder.

They have connections with a known criminal organisation in Limerick and two of them are known to have lived in the city in the past.

The 33-year-old and 17-year-old are well known to gardai in Limerick and both have been prosecuted for serious firearms offences in the past.

The PSNI confirmed in a statement on Tuesday night that all three men had been "released unconditionally" pending further investigation.

Gardaí and the PSNI are working closely together and are trying to establish if the men had agreed to travel to Belfast with Mr Lawlor to help him collect a drugs debt but were secretly working with other criminals to set him up to be shot dead in the city.

The 35-year-old criminal, who was released from prison late last year, died after he was shot a number of times outside a house at Etna Drive, Ardoyne shortly before midday on Saturday.

A fourth man, also arrested at the weekend, was released on Monday while a fifth man – aged 36 – remained in custody this Wednesday.

Separately, two women who were arrested following the seizure of €50,000 in cash earlier this week have been released without charge.

The women, who are both from Limerick, were detained at around 2pm on Monday after gardai stopped a car which was travelling southbound on the M7 motorway near Portlaoise.

The cash was seized during a search of the vehicle and both women were taken to Portlaoise garda station where they were questioned under Section 4 of the Criminal Justice Act, 1984.

It's understood the women, who were returning to Limerick when stopped, had been observed by gardai in the Drogheda area earlier in the day.

Gardai have confirmed they have since been released and that a file will be prepared for the Director of Public Prosecutions.

The women, who are aged in their 20s and 30s, have connections with known criminals in Limerick and one line of enquiry being pursued by gardai is that the money was linked to the murder of Robbie Lawlor.

Investigations into the origins of the money are continuing but gardaí suspect it may have been a payment to Limerick criminals for their role in aiding the murder of Robbie Lawlor and that the women were acting as couriers in collecting the cash.

Gardaí are concerned that the criminals associated with an organised crime gang in Limerick are now effectively involved in the Drogheda feud which erupted in recent years.

Covid-19 latest

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suffering acute medical episodes such as heart attacks and strokes Dr Samer Arnous, a consultant cardiologist with UL Hospitals Group has urged the public to go to the hospital if they are seriously unwell.

"We don't have exact figures yet but we usually see on average one or two heart attacks per day and we are now seeing that per week. So there is certainly a significant drop and unfortunately a lot of the people who do come in are sicker than we would usually see," Dr Arnous told the Leader.

"People are maybe thinking the symptoms aren't too bad, the chest pain isn't always severe. They don't want to go in, to make sure they don't contract the Covid-19 virus and maybe people are thinking there are others worse off than I am and I'm not going to take a bed which may be needed for somebody else.

" Your risk of getting an infection is very low and your risk of having a problem or complications by not presenting if you have a serious problem is significantly higher," Dr Arnous warned.

Ahead of the Easter Bank Holiday weekend Colette Cowan, CEO, UL Hospitals Group has urged the public to stay at home this weekend "and to remember that Ballybunion and Kilkee will still be there when the emergency passes and we can enjoy it all the more."

"There can be no room for complacency and we thank the public for their continued cooperation," said Ms Cowan. "As we go into a bank holiday weekend, we ask that people consider health workers and the vulnerable members of our community. We ask that people enjoy Easter at home with their immediate families, to connect with relatives by phone or video call and to remember that Ballybunion and Kilkee will still be there when the emergency passes and we can enjoy it all the more."

There was widespread anger this Wednesday lunchtime at scenes on Shannon Bridge in the city captured by Leader reporter Nick Rabbitts. The image shows long tailbacks on a key route into Limerick city centre as a crackdown on people travelling began. With all but key workers asked to remain home, and restrict their movements to avoid the spread of Covid-19, garda checkpoints were set up in various parts of the city.

Meanwhile, the Limerick Leader understands that the authorities visited a house of worship this week after it emerged that the sacrament of Holy Communion was being administered by members of the clergy from a residence beside the church.

A parishioner made contact with the Limerick Leader to voice his disappointment that the clergy were told to refrain from administering the Eucharist, on health and safety grounds. It is understood that up to four times a day a small queue of people would line up outside the residence, while observing social distancing, before receiving the Eucharist on their tongue.

This Wednesday, Bishop of Limerick Brendan Leahy said in a statement to the Leader: "People have a deep longing for the connection that Holy Communion gives and priests have been asked by a very small number of parishioners to accommodate this over recent weeks. However, we have reiterated to them that, in the current environment and as well intentioned as it would be to provide this sacrament, we simply cannot for public health reasons.

"We do appreciate people's disappointment but we are also grateful for most people's understanding of the situation in these challenging times. What we do now is recommend the practice of spiritual communion to all who cannot receive the Eucharist at this time."

Call to action for healthcare staff to work in the new intermediate care facility

UL Arena to have up to 164 beds for Covid-19 patients

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A CALL to action is being issued for healthcare workers ahead of the opening of a major intermediate care facility in the sports hall at the UL Arena which will potentially accommodate up to 164 patients who have contracted Covid-19.

It is anticipated that work on the facility, which will primarily be a step-down and rehabilitation facility, will begin within the next week to 10 days.

"We would be looking at dealing with patients who are in the recovery phase who have recovered maybe from a bad chest infection or may even have been on a ventilator in intensive care and are very weak and need to go to an area to rest and have focused rehabilitation," explained Professor Paul Burke, chief academic officer, UL Hospitals Group, and the University of Limerick

"You may have another group then who aren't too sick but maybe are still Covid positive and probably can't go home. We would have a portion of this area cordoned off for that group of patients. We would have it divided into an area for Covid positive patients and the rest would be for Covid negative patients," Prof Burke continued.

A plan has been drawn up to accommodate anything up to 164 beds on the main floor space of the sports hall in the arena.

"Essentially it is a fairly basic layout of beds in what we would call the old traditional Nightingale wards - just a row of beds," Prof Burke explained. "So you have a row of 10 beds and 10 beds opposite them and then those 10 beds are back-to-back with another 10 beds in another ward. So you would have a ward, if you like, of 20 beds. They will be set up partitioned."

All the beds will have their own lockers and are to be positioned suitably apart so there is no risk of cross infection.

"They can all be constructed relatively quickly. The attraction of the arena is it already has the existing toilet facilities, shower facilities etc of a fairly significant number so we don't have to supplement that to a huge level. We have to bring in additional wash hand basins and things like that but a lot of the rooms around the gym can be changed to function for the different functions that any ward would need to have.

The UL Sports Arena, pictured above, has played host to many sporting and social events in the past, and from next week it looks set to be transformed into a major intermediate care facility with a potential for up to 164 beds to be positioned on the ground floor of the hall for patients who contracted Covid-19

Professor Paul Burke says securing staff is going to be a challenge

"We would envisage starting it with a smaller number, particularly focusing on the rehab facility, but if we manage to get more staff and there is a need for more staff and there is a further strong call for help because there is such pressure on the system then we would be able to ramp it up and provide more beds."

The crucial and most challenging aspect, Prof Burke says is securing staff to work in the facility.

It is envisaged that a number of the patients could be post-ventilation patients who may require a significant amount of general build up, rehabilitation, physiotherapy and even some speech and language therapy if they have been on a ventilator for some time.

"When we set about planning this, it was St Patrick's Day actually I think was the first day we went out to look at the area, the figures were predicting that by the end of the month.. the Taoiseach had said there would be 15,000 cases by the end of the month. So we are still working based on that model and although the numbers are lower, clearly the anticipation is that this is going to be a marathon and not a sprint and so we are still going to have numbers slowly building up on a continual basis.

"We are putting out a general call (for staff) and that's gone out this week. We are looking at it I suppose long term as well particularly in relation to trained staff, that if we are able to get these people in now there will be jobs for these people down the line. We have the 60-bed unit which is obviously being built at the moment in UHL which is going to require staffing and there are other beds going up in UHL as well so there would be up to 80 new additional beds in UHL by the end of the autumn. So we will need staff for those even after the need for the intermediate care facility has passed."

The hope is that staff with medical backgrounds would return from abroad .

"We are also obviously hoping to attract back as many of our own student nurses as possible because the directive from the Department of Health was that the universities should release all the health/science students from their clinical placements and allow them to apply for these healthcare assistant posts. They would obviously work alongside fully qualified nurses but if they are in their last year of training or second last year of training they would already be quite well orientated and skilled towards that so they would be working as healthcare assistants but with a strong nursing background so to speak.

"The university is obviously supported by the allied health, sciences faculty which obviously has the physiotherapists and speech and language therapists and dieticians there.

"We've had good indications from that school that they would be able to help supplement whatever the HSE is going to be able to help give us in terms of staff because the challenge is going to be to get staff," Prof Burke explained.

Gardai seize €47k

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examination.

A further €20,000 in cash was seized at the house during follow-up searches on Monday.

At the second house, suspected cannabis herb, with an estimated value of €1,000, was seized.

It will now be sent for further analysis.

A garda spokesperson has confirmed the two suspects have been released from custody and that a file will be prepared for the Director of Public Prosecutions.

The cash will be held by gardai along with the other items seized.

Separately, a file is to be prepared for the DPP following a significant drugs seizure in the city.

Cannabis herb worth around €20,000 was seized on Sunday when gardai stopped a man in the Thomondgate area.

Granny 'petrified'

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same day – March 30.

Her daughter said what happened is an "absolute disgrace" and needs to be addressed. She said it was not an "isolated incident" in the town involving the same youths.

"If we all report this unacceptable behaviour when we witness it, something finally will be done," she said.

Cllr PJ Carey said if a lady can't walk down the Main Street of Kilmallock "without being accosted and abused by these thugs then action must be taken".

"This is unacceptable. It's the same 1% all the time, they have no respect for anybody. The guards need to patrol the streets.

"I will be calling for legislation to be introduced where any child that would be involved in this type of disgusting behaviour, to be fined and the money taken directly from the children's allowance," said Cllr Carey.

The Independent councillor added: "This would force the parents to mind their children, enforce good manners and good behaviour. I believe this would eradicate the problem.

"If the mammies and daddies were out of pocket I'm sure they would miraculously become better parents."

Limerick's only senator vows to pursue 'radical agenda for change'

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LIMERICK's only senator Paul Gavan has pledged to pursue a "radical agenda for change" in the Upper House.

Unless Taoiseach Leo Varadkar decides to add a local politician as part of his nominations, Seanad Eireann will have just one member from the Limerick area, Mr Gavan of Castleconnell.

Last Thursday, the Sinn Fein man secured a seat on the final count for the labour panel after his nomination from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

Outgoing Fine Gael senator Maria Byrne missed out on a return to the agricultural panel, as her party colleague, the former TD Tom Neville could not gain a seat on the educational and cultural panel.

Former Limerick-based youth worker William Priestley, running for the Green Party also missed out on the Trinity College Panel. Solicitor, and one-time Hillary Clinton fundraiser Linda O'Shea-Farran was also defeated in her bid for the industrial and commercial panel.

Senator Paul Gavan
PICTURE: ADRIAN BUTLER

Although now based in Dublin, she went to school at Laurel Hill in the city.

All this means Mr Gavan, a former Siptu trade union official, is Limerick's sole voice in the chamber.

He said he will be a strong voice for Limerick and will campaign for workers rights and social justice in the new Seanad.

"Limerick needs a voice in both chambers of parliament in the Oireachtas. As things stand I will be the only Limerick representative in the new Seanad. I will use that platform to campaign around key issues of housing, healthcare and social justice," he said.

He said he will continue to demand a higher level of investment in public housing throughout Limerick.

"The housing crisis is a direct result of years of inaction by governments who were content to leave housing supply to the market," he said, confirming that Sinn Fein will demand an extension to the current ban on evictions and rent rises, and will champion new plans to extend security of tenure to tenants.

"We need to move to a European model of housing with a mix of public housing, and co-operative housing, working alongside a well regulated private sector," he said.

Mr Gavan also hopes to continue to represent his party and Ireland at the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe, where he has spoken out on issues such as justice for Palestine, Direct Provision and the plight of refugees across Europe.

It was a dramatic night at the count centre in Dublin Castle, with Mr Gavan forced to watch on from home due to the advice to candidates not to travel to the capital.

He was following the count through online streaming, and updates through the social network Twitter. In Seanad elections, one vote is counted as 1,000 to aid tie-breaker situations due to the small electorate.

Although Mr Gavan enjoyed a solid start, putting 72,000 first preference votes on the board, he was forced to wait until the 17th count to secure his Oireachtas berth.

It came thanks in no small part to a transfer from his party running mate, outgoing Senator Maire Devine, who transferred 75% to her colleague after her elimination. This gave him enough of a lead to see him elected, albeit without reaching the quota. It's his second Seanad term, having first been elected in 2016.

TDs welcome extra powers for gardai

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DEPUTY Niall Collins and Minister Patrick O'Donovan have welcomed new powers for gardai to enforce coronavirus restrictions.

They are now able to arrest people who refuse to comply. A €2,500 fine or six months in jail are the penalties. Deputy Niall Collins called on gardai to use their new powers to target the minority of the community in Rathkeale who are flouting HSE guidelines.

"There is massive concern among the wider Rathkeale community that the actions of the few could spread Covid-19 to the many. We have all seen the open air barber video. People are angry and incensed over it.

"Now there is a video of a party bus driving around. They are stocking up on alcohol and are sat closely together. One even shouts 'up the coronavirus'. It beggars belief," said Deputy Collins.

He continued: "I am calling on gardai to have a very heavy presence in the Rathkeale area and use their new powers to the full force of the law to prevent people travelling 2kms from their homes without a valid reason."

Minister O'Donovan said simply, "People need to cop on".

"This is no longer something that might happen – this is happening. People in our communities are dying. This virus is being spread through the community. We don't know how many more people are going to die. Some people might think it is a big joke. This is deadly serious and I welcome that the guards have been so visible and so proactive," said Minister O'Donovan.

He called on the community to "do their part and report people".

"I know that might sound like a difficult thing to do but it is not. You need to ring the guards and you need to report them. Even if they are your neighbours you need to report them because the behaviour of some could cost the lives of others," he said.