

Irish Republican Army promises to put weaponry "beyond use"

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The Irish Republican Army (IRA) has pledged to put its weaponry "beyond use" and permit its weapons dumps to be overseen by international monitors. The promise was made on Saturday, May 6, just 12 hours after British Prime Minister Tony Blair called for a commitment to decommission weapons in order to allow the power-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly to be reconvened on May 22. This is the second anniversary of the ratification of the Good Friday Agreement, which established the Assembly, in referendums held both sides of the Irish border.

The IRA's announcement came after London and Dublin issued a joint statement that extended the deadline for disarmament from May 22, 2000 to June 2001. The British government had also said it would bring forward legislation to reinstate the Assembly and Executive, and pledged to take "substantial normalisation measures by June 2001" to reduce its security presence in the province.

The third parties agreed to oversee the weapons' inspections are former African National Congress (ANC) Secretary General Cyril Ramaphosa and recently retired Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari. Both are members of the International Crisis Group, headed by former US Senator George Mitchell, who headed up the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement.

The IRA's statement read, "The IRA leadership will initiate a process that will completely and verifiably put IRA arms beyond use" within weeks. A number of arms dumps will be inspected by "agreed third parties" and "re-inspected regularly to ensure that the weapons have remained silent". The process, the IRA said, would render its arsenal "completely and verifiably beyond use".

The British and Irish Governments and the Northern Ireland nationalist Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) welcomed the IRA announcement. Peter Mandelson, British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, said he supported plans to identify but not destroy

IRA arms dumps, since this would allow the rebels to renounce violence "without feeling that others are standing over them and demanding that they surrender." US President Bill Clinton said the IRA announcement was a "truly historic step" in the peace process.

Gerry Adams, leader of the political wing of the IRA, Sinn Féin, insisted the IRA offer went beyond the terms of the Good Friday pact. "The IRA doesn't have to do this. It is only doing it to try and give some assurance to those who are nervous or genuinely concerned," he said.

The Northern Ireland Assembly, in which the main unionist (i.e., pro-British) and Irish nationalist parties sat together, was formed in December 1999, but Britain re-imposed direct rule on February 11, 2000 because of the IRA's refusal to begin decommissioning its weapons.

The main pro-British party, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), led by David Trimble, had originally demanded that the decommissioning of weapons take place before the all-party Executive was formed. However, no such provision was contained in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement setting down the plans for power-sharing in Britain's oldest colony.

The hard line subsequently taken by Britain was considered necessary in order to guard Trimble's rear from attacks by anti-Agreement forces within his own party and from the rival Democratic Unionist Party of Ian Paisley. In a recent leadership challenge, 43 percent of the UUP backed Martin Smyth against Trimble.

Sinn Féin head Adams has to reassure minority factions wary of disarmament within his own party and also has to take into account some 200 members of the breakaway nationalist factions "Continuity IRA" and "Real IRA." The main obstacle to renewing devolved government in Northern Ireland, however, are hard-line Unionists opposed in principle to any agreement with Sinn Féin.

Trimble was involved at every stage in the discussions leading up to the IRA's announcement. He was

nevertheless forced to frame his words welcoming the move carefully, to ensure that his political enemies were not given any ammunition they could use against him. He said the IRA statement made "it very clear that the gun has been taken out of Irish politics forever," but added, "there are also some questions that we have already raised with people that we want to just tease out ... particularly about ensuring that weapons remain secure."

There is little possibility that his caution will appease the anti-Agreement Unionists when the new IRA offer is debated in the UUP's ruling council on May 20. UUP hard-liner Jeffrey Donaldson said, "The real issue here is when and how are the IRA going to decommission their illegal weapons. It is not good enough simply to give access to bunkers which remain in the possession of the IRA and to which the IRA has full access." His ally William Thompson claimed Trimble's leadership of the party is threatened if he advocates a return to the Assembly. "He would be a fool to buy it.... There is no certainty [of decommissioning] here." DUP leader Paisley declared baldly, "I don't trust IRA murderers. I don't care what they say."

Trimble is said to be confident that he can secure the agreement of his party before the Ulster Unionist Council meets. His position has been strengthened by the IRA's statement, together with opinion polls showing a favourable response amongst Northern Ireland's Protestants. If he carries the day, however, there could still be splits from the UUP to the DUP by hard-liners. Aware of the dangers, Bertie Ahern, the prime minister of the Irish Republic, warned that if Unionists rejected the offer, neither the British nor Irish governments, nor President Clinton "has any other bright ideas".

Ahern offered to work "in every way" to help Trimble convince Unionists to accept the new agreement. For his part, Mandelson said he did not rule out reports that the name of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) would be incorporated into the new Police Service of Northern Ireland when legislation reforming the overwhelmingly Protestant force is brought forward. The UUP voted earlier to make retaining the RUC's name a precondition for re-entering the Assembly.

Trimble's support for the Good Friday Agreement reflects the dominant position within the Northern Ireland bourgeoisie. Economic decline, together with the cost of policing civil unrest, has made Northern Ireland a tremendous financial drain on Britain. With London determined to end the parasitic existence of its Unionist allies, the only avenue open to the ruling Protestant elite

in the six northern counties is to work with their Catholic neighbours to the south, and emulate their success in transforming the Irish Republic into a favoured investment location for global corporations seeking access to the European market.

For other layers of the Unionist camp, dependent for their privileges on the north's large public sector and the domination of the RUC, accepting an end to British patronage spells disaster. But what they can do about it is another question.

Their initial success in whipping up fears of a return to violence by the IRA does not reflect any broad popular support amongst Protestant workers for a return to sectarian conflict. Even their defenders in the British establishment have indicated that it is time to abandon opposition to power-sharing. Conservative Party leader William Hague gave cautious backing to the IRA statement, while the *Daily Telegraph*, which mounted a campaign to defend the RUC and oppose sitting down with Sinn Fein, opined that "the republican terrorists' 'war' to end British rule is at an end". The *Irish Independent* pointed out, "If Trimble wins ... it will be because there is nowhere else for the party to go except into the arms of Ian Paisley."

The readiness of Sinn Fein and the IRA to abandon opposition to British rule is also motivated fundamentally by economic considerations. In return, they hope to secure their own position in a "new" Northern Ireland, where major international corporations will be encouraged to invest and exploit the cheap labour provided by Catholic and Protestant workers alike.

The media made much of the choice of Cyril Ramaphosa to monitor arms dumps, stressing his credentials within the IRA as a veteran of the ANC's armed liberation struggle. But Ramaphosa's present status is as much a recommendation to the Irish nationalist leaders as his past. Since playing the role of a key negotiator in South Africa's transition from white rule in 1994, Ramaphosa has carved out a business empire and a place in *Forbes* magazine's list of the world's 200 richest people.



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