

President Clinton pledges clampdown on terrorism in Ireland

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Bill Clinton made his third and final visit as US President to Ireland earlier this week. The two-day tour had all the makings of a farewell celebration. Accompanied by his wife, daughter and mother-in-law, he addressed packed and enthusiastic audiences north and south of the border, many of whom see him as the major architect of the Northern Ireland "peace process".

No doubt such sentiment is important if Clinton is to leave his mark in the history books, and perhaps take up a new role after leaving office—one he has apparently expressed interest in—as a US peace envoy. Fond farewells and future prosperity aside, however, Clinton's visit was necessary to address more immediate problems.

In the last month, David Trimble, First Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly established under the Good Friday Agreement, imposed a ban on Sinn Fein ministers attending cross-border meetings, until the IRA decommissioned its weapons. Sinn Fein denounced the move as illegal and began a challenge against Trimble in the High Court today. Tensions are also high between the nationalist parties and the British government over proposals for the reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC).

Just as Clinton's visit began, the North was scarred by a series of tit-for-tat killings. On the evening of December 5, Trevor Kell (35), a Protestant cabdriver, was gunned down at the wheel of his car after answering a bogus call. The next day loyalist paramilitaries killed Gary Moore (30), a Catholic workman on a building site. Just minutes later in Londonderry, Paul Scullion was shot six times by a gunman on a motorbike as he sat in his taxi on the Oldpark Rd.

The Ulster Defence Association claimed responsibility for the December 6 shootings, claiming they were in retaliation for the murder of Trevor Kell. But leading Loyalists and Republicans charged British intelligence forces with organising a dirty-tricks operation to destabilise the Agreement. Billy Hutchinson of the pro-Agreement Progressive Unionist Party said, "It could have been a Republican who pulled the trigger, it could have been a Loyalist—but I am convinced it was sanctioned by military

intelligence. No one can tell me that military intelligence has not infiltrated the ranks of republican and loyalist dissident groups".

Hutchinson said it was "too coincidental" that the shootings should occur just before Clinton's visit. "Whoever carried out this murder wanted tit-for-tat killings and set out to create panic—and that is exactly what happened." Speaking for Sinn Fein, Gerry Kelly said that RUC chief Ronnie Flannagan's assertion that Kell had been killed by republicans, after initially stating the murder was not sectarian, would be "used as an excuse to kill more Catholics".

Whatever the truth of Hutchinson's assertions, fears about a revival of sectarian murders were undoubtedly in the forefront of the minds of the tens of thousands who turned out on December 12 to greet Clinton in Dundalk, close to the border with the North.

The size of the crowds greeting Clinton again indicated the relative political isolation of the hardline Unionist and Republican groups who are intent on wrecking the Good Friday Agreement. The Irish population is still overwhelmingly in favour of a peaceful solution to "the Troubles". But the aspirations of the Irish people have played no real role in shaping the political arrangements which the US, British and Irish governments are seeking to implement: a new *modus vivendi* between the main sectarian parties to create more favourable conditions for global business operations. Clinton's visit was thus aimed at forcing Sinn Fein and the Ulster Unionist Party to play ball with each other, while marginalising the anti-Agreement forces on both sides.

Clinton referred to the recent shootings in his remarks before an audience of 60,000 people in the Market Square, as he called on Irish people to "stand up for peace today, tomorrow and for the rest of your life".

Press reports indicate there was a flurry of diplomatic activity surrounding Clinton's arrival in Ireland. High-ranking officials had flown in to Belfast from the European Union Summit in Nice on Monday, to continue talks with

the pro-Agreement parties. Clinton also held several hours of talks with them on Wednesday.

By the end of his visit, there was little indication of a substantial compromise having emerged. But Clinton's trip had been more about sending out signals and using his public support throughout Ireland, along with America's substantial economic clout, in an attempt to push the Agreement along.

Everything was carefully choreographed from this standpoint. In the last month, the British government, the RUC and the Garda (Irish police) have asked the US Congress to clampdown on the anti-Agreement Real IRA—responsible for the 1998 Omagh bombing that killed 29 people. The Real IRA is already treated as a terrorist organisation by the US authorities. The effect of formally designating as such would be to make additional legal powers available to law enforcement officials in dealing with the group.

Clinton's speech in Dundalk was seen as a significant nod in that direction. The border town, which is home to the leadership of the Real IRA, is one of the main recipients of US investment in the last few years. Speaking in Market Square, revamped with the help of international aid, Clinton praised the town as a model of "economic regeneration". Ireland was now one of the fastest growing economies in the world, he said. Pointing to the numerous global corporations that had set up their headquarters on the island, he informed his audience that Ireland was now the leading exporter of computer software in the world and US investment has been crucial in this. The message underlining Clinton's remarks, delivered just as another US pharmaceutical company announced it would create over 1,000 jobs in Co. Longford in the Irish Republic, was clear: All this would be jeopardised if the Agreement failed.

It was also the thrust of his remarks made on December 13—speaking from another symbol of Ireland regenerated, this time in the North—at Belfast's £91m showpiece Odyssey sports arena. Some 8,000 were invited to the waterfront meeting, which began just hours after Clinton had held three hours of closed talks with Prime Minister Blair and the pro-Agreement parties, Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Social Democratic Labour Party.

Although in his public remarks Clinton did not directly pledge to outlaw the Real IRA, he did announce that there would be a stepping up of US cooperation with Britain and Ireland in the clamp down on terrorism. "The US will intensify its cooperation with the British and Irish authorities on counter-terrorism to combat groups seeking to undermine the Good Friday accord through violence," Clinton said, adding that experts from the three nations will soon meet to strategise. That the forces opposed to the Agreement were

being sent their marching orders in no uncertain terms was underscored by the decision to exclude the anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party from the talks, despite their having representatives in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Speaking at the Odyssey centre, Clinton praised the security forces and welcomed the IRA's reaffirmation of its commitment to the Agreement, whilst adding, "The follow-through will be even more welcome."

He also set out a three-point plan for making progress in the Agreement—the reforms proposed by the Patten Commission for the RUC must be implemented, British security operations scaled down and paramilitary weapons put beyond use. "Somehow these processes must take place together to give practical effect on the ground to the rhetorical promise of peace," Clinton said.

It now appears that efforts are to be made along these lines. Northern Ireland's parties have begun studying the British government's draft plans on police reform. The nationalist parties had been sharply critical of changes made to the Patten Commission's original proposals on RUC reform and had so far refused to nominate any representatives to the new Police Board. It was hoped that draft plans outlining a timetable for implementation would accommodate some of their concerns.

The press also report that Irish premier Bertie Ahern is pressing Sinn Féin to make a further gesture on arms decommissioning that will enable Trimble to lift the bar on Sinn Féin attending cross-border meetings. But the Blair government will in return have to agree to a "significant demilitarisation" in South Armagh. This could involve reducing troop numbers, removing a major military base, or dismantling some of the large lookout posts in the area. The British security services are said to oppose any such moves and have been quoted anonymous in the press warning Blair that they will hold him responsible for any loss of life resulting from a reduced security presence. The Irish government's pledge to "share the risk" by increasing Garda numbers in the border regions, along with Clinton's pledge for US involvement in counter-terrorism, are aimed at placating such opposition.



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