

IRA offers plan to put its weapons "beyond use"

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The Irish Republican Army (IRA) has made its most forthright statement to-date regarding the decommissioning of arms. It did so only hours before the parties that signed up to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement were due to respond to joint British and Irish government proposals aimed at rescuing the power-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly from collapse.

On Monday afternoon, with the latest deadline imposed from London due to expire at midnight, General John de Chastelain reported that the IRA had given his decommissioning body a "satisfactory" plan for putting their weapons "completely and verifiably beyond use".

The IRA statement was a last ditch effort to stave off the collapse of the Assembly following David Trimble's resignation as First Minister in protest at a lack of movement on decommissioning by the IRA. Trimble's resignation was an attempt to appease hardliners inside the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), as well as the anti-agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Ian Paisley, who insisted that the IRA's failure to hand over weapons meant that Sinn Fein should be thrown off the Assembly's Executive.

There were furious calls in the media for the IRA to make some sort of gesture on arms that would allow UUP leader Trimble to resume his position as First Minister, otherwise new Assembly elections would have to be called in which the anti-Agreement parties would probably gain increased support.

Three years ago, the majority of working people throughout Ireland, north and south, signalled their rejection of sectarian violence and voted in favour of the Good Friday Agreement establishing the Northern Ireland Assembly. The new arrangements, including an all-party Executive, were supposed to herald a new era of peace and democracy. Whether or not the latest talks succeed in rescuing the Assembly from collapse, however, the Agreement cannot satisfy the hopes placed in it by the Irish working class. The Agreement never addressed the historic sources of the conflict in the north, nor did it offer a means of alleviating social hardship that is the breeding ground for sectarianism.

Instead it sought to create better conditions for attracting international investment by incorporating the sectarian parties on both sides into the mechanisms of rule. It enshrined a veto for Unionist and Nationalist parties on social and economic policy questions, while leaving security and the ability to dissolve the Assembly in the hands of the British state.

At every major turn of events, the essential inability of the Good Friday Agreement to paper over the historic problems besetting Northern Ireland has been exposed. Sectarian conflicts have continued to be the focus of political life.

In order to enable Sinn Fein/IRA to take up positions within the new constitutional arrangements, the Agreement avoided specifying a date for arms' decommissioning. The issue was also linked to measures intended to end the overtly pro-Unionist bias of institutions such as the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and to decrease the presence of the British Army. But the issue of decommissioning rapidly became the focus for opposition to the Agreement from those Unionists who feared the loss of their political hegemony due to the growing political influence of Sinn Fein and the Social and Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) and the possibility of unification with the Irish republic in the south once Catholics become a majority of the population in the north.

By addressing the controversial issues of "Policing", security "Normalisation", "Stability of the institutions" and "Decommissioning" as a package in their report, the British and Irish governments have, with US support, tried not to upset the Unionists while attempting to give enough to the Republican side to enable the IRA to move on decommissioning.

In a statement to the leaders of the parties supporting the Good Friday Agreement—principally Trimble's UUP, the SDLP and Sinn Fein—Northern Ireland Secretary John Reid and Irish Foreign Affairs Minister Brian Cowen said they believed the new package "represents a fair, balanced and justified package of proposals."

On policing, the new document promises to "set out in

greater detail the plans for implementing, among other matters, Patten's recommendations on the Full Time Reserve, the Part Time Reserve [of the RUC], the closure of Gough Barracks Holding Centre and the future structure of Special Branch." It further promises to avoid the use of plastic bullets, "except where there is a serious risk of loss of life or serious injury" while a research into alternatives is completed.

The controversial issue of the murder of prominent Catholic civil rights lawyers Pat Finucane and Rosemary Nelson—both involving allegations of RUC collusion—is dealt with in a general proposal for an independent international inquiry into a number of killings on both sides of the sectarian divide.

On normalisation, the report specifies that subject to a "significant reduction in the level of threat", a number of detention centres and army watch towers will be removed.

On decommissioning, much to the dislike of Unionists, the package simply repeats the formula that it is an "indispensable part of implementing the Good Friday Agreement," and calls upon the parties to recognise that decommissioning must be resolved "in a manner acceptable to and verified by the Independent Commission on Decommissioning" headed by General de Chastelain.

Speaking of the latest statement by de Chastelain, Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams said it marked a "hugely historical breakthrough", and for the British government, Reid said he welcomed the statement and that it was "a highly significant and important step forward."

Peter Robinson, deputy leader of the anti-Agreement DUP, remained hostile, saying there was no indication of when the process would begin. "All they are saying is that they can agree a method. They are not saying when it's going to happen and people must know what the mechanism is." For his part, Trimble gave a guarded welcome, stating, "we have seen a step by republicans, but of course, it falls far short of what we need—which is to see decommissioning actually begin."

In an attempt to further reassure the Unionists, the *Guardian* newspaper carried a report Tuesday quoting unidentified Republican sources saying that the IRA was about to issue a statement indicating that the destruction of arms would begin within a month.

It is not only the Unionists who confront opposition from within their own camp. Hardline nationalists in the Real IRA have refused to adhere to a cease-fire. Just before midnight on Thursday August 2, a huge car bomb exploded near London's Ealing Broadway underground station, in an area packed with restaurants, pubs and bars. It was pure luck that no one was killed and less than a dozen people were injured, mainly from flying glass. Scotland Yard said the 40

kilogram bomb—made from fertiliser packed in a plastic drum—"could have been our Omagh," in a reference to the Real IRA bomb which killed 29 people in County Tyrone in September 1998.

A warning call was made to a doctor's out-of-hours call centre less than 30 minutes before the explosion occurred but was vague as to the whereabouts of the bomb. According to the police, the caller mentioned Ealing Broadway Road, which does not exist, and refused to give details of the car carrying the explosives, later reported to be a grey Saab saloon.

The Real IRA could have set off the bomb in order to bring an end to the discussions aimed at saving the Northern Ireland Assembly, by deliberately inflaming sectarian tensions, but they have not yet claimed responsibility. It also cannot be ruled out that British security forces may have carried out the bombing in order to place maximum pressure on Sinn Fein. In either event, it only served to strengthen the hand of British imperialism rather than weaken it.

Such terrorist bombings work to undermine the possibility of establishing the political unity between Catholic and Protestant workers that is a precondition for any genuine advance in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, it drives all those seeking an end to the conflict into the hands of the pro-Agreement parties and lends legitimacy to the pro-business agenda of the British and Irish governments.

The bombing has also been used to justify further attacks on democratic rights. In its aftermath, the police have unveiled "Operation Big Eye", a £20 million nationwide network of secret cameras with lenses developed by NASA, said to be so advanced that they can read the details on a vehicle's road tax disc. The 250 cameras are stationed across Britain's motorways, as well as in more than 20 other major roads in London, Manchester and Birmingham. They can record an image of every passing driver. Ostensibly in order to compare the faces with a database of over 1,000 Republican terrorist suspects and known sympathisers, the system enables the movements of the entire British population to be monitored.



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