

Northern Ireland: Catholic girls school becomes focus for sectarian violence

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Sectarian bigotry and violence over access to the Holy Cross Catholic girls' school in north Belfast is continuing. The first day of the new school term on Monday witnessed ugly scenes, as Protestant protesters attempted to stop schoolgirls, some as young as four years of age, and their parents, entering the school by the contested Ardoyne Road entrance.

Flanked by a security cordon involving hundreds of police and British soldiers, some 50 children had to run a gauntlet of hate to walk the 300 yards down the road, which criss-crosses a housing estate divided along religious lines, to reach their school entrance. On the other side of the cordon a 200-strong crowd hurled verbal abuse, stones and bottles. Many of the children, filmed crying and clutching their parents, were so traumatised by the experience that they left the school by the back entrance almost immediately. Two Catholic women were injured when they were struck on the head by missiles thrown by the protestors.

The tension increased still further when a blast, thought to be a bomb, occurred in nearby Glenbryn Parade, injuring a Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) officer. On Monday evening, as Catholic parents met with school governors to decide how Holy Cross pupils should get to school, the so-called Red Hand Defenders, a flag of convenience employed by loyalist paramilitary organisations, issued a warning to Catholic parents not to use the Ardoyne Road entrance again. Sectarian rioting continued in the area during the night, as nationalist and loyalist youth clashed with one another and with security forces. The RUC said that more than 135 petrol bombs had been thrown in the disturbances, during which 22 police officers were injured, and that they had come under gunfire from both sides.

On Tuesday morning, as Holy Cross pupils again

attempted to gain entrance to the school behind police lines, an RUC officer was struck by a pipebomb.

Many commentators compared Monday's scenes with the hate-filled mobs that gathered in several US states to protest the racial integration of American schools at the end of the 1950s. In Belfast, however, many schools remain segregated and the protests centre on the right of children of a differing religion to walk the road.

This week's events are the culmination of a bitter, months-long dispute over access to Holy Cross school. The Ardoyne is at the heart of Belfast's sectarian divide. Although a predominantly Catholic area, Holy Cross school is situated in what is effectively a Protestant enclave.

The area has long been a focus for violent clashes between paramilitary groups for territorial control. The Ulster Defence Association and the Ulster Volunteer Force are both active—just four years ago several Catholic families were forcibly evicted from their homes by loyalist terror gangs. The MP for the area, Nigel Dodds, is a member of Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which is fiercely opposed to the power-sharing structures established in the North by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

The school first became a flashpoint for these tensions in June, when loyalists and nationalists both alleged that the other side was using the school route to launch attacks. Catholic parents said their children were being subjected to intimidation if they tried to enter the school by the front gate, whilst protestants claimed they were being denied access to local amenities at the nationalist end of the Ardoyne.

The month ended with several nights of rioting and many Holy Cross pupils forced to make a lengthy detour to their school via Crumlin Road. On June 25 a

suspected bomb found attached to the school's railings forced its closure for the day.

Throughout the summer there was a series of pipebomb attacks—mainly on Catholic homes—in what nationalists argue is part of a concerted campaign by loyalists to extend their territory.

Against this background talks held between local nationalist and loyalist representatives during the school holidays failed to resolve the issue of access to Holy Cross prior to the new term. On Monday the chairman of the school's board of governors, Father Aidan Troy, announced the board's recommendation that children should temporarily use an alternative entrance through the grounds of an adjacent school until the dispute was resolved.

Monday's troubles have further exacerbated the sectarian divide. Two opposing groups have been formed. The Concerned Residents of Upper Ardoyne blame nationalists for the trouble. One CRUR representative, Jim Potts, has demanded that Holy Cross be closed. "This is a loyalist community", Potts said, arguing that the government must "build a new school for these children in [Catholic] Ardoyne." Nationalist residents have formed the Right to Education group to oppose their children's schooling being held hostage to other issues. Some Catholic residents allege that Protestants want to take over the Holy Cross site for their own children, because the Protestant Wheatfield School located in the same area is so run-down.

Leading representatives of the British and Irish governments have condemned the loyalist protests and have used the events to try and bolster support for the currently stalled negotiations on arms decommissioning by the IRA, arguing that only the successful implementation of Northern Ireland's new power-sharing structures can resolve such fratricidal divisions.

In reality, the week's events have only illustrated the ineffectiveness of the new arrangements in overcoming sectarianism. The Agreement resolved none of the historic issues at the heart of Ireland's long-standing divisions, much less the social deprivation that scars many working class Catholic and Protestant areas. Aimed solely at creating a more stable economic and political environment for big business, the Agreement drawn up between the US, British and Irish governments enabled the loyalist and nationalist parties

to take up positions in government in return for a military ceasefire.

To ease their way, the Agreement enshrined sectarianism as the basis of political life in the North. Its constitutional provisions accepted Northern Ireland's division into two opposing religious camps and recognised the loyalist and nationalist parties as the legitimate representatives of the respective communities by giving them a mutual veto on legislation. Subsequently the various paramilitary organisations have strengthened their de facto control over certain territories, whilst the new structures and their spoils have become an arena for competing interests.

As the violence flared outside Holy Cross School, David Trimble, leader of the main pro-Agreement Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), met with DUP leader Ian Paisley to discuss proposals for changes to Northern Ireland's police force. The meeting—the first face-to-face talks between the two loyalist leaders since 1998—signalled the entrenching of opposition within both parties towards proposals to reform the overwhelmingly protestant RUC.



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