

Political tensions increase in Northern Ireland

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Northern Ireland is currently witnessing the worst violence in 30 years. On September 28, Martin O'Hagan became the first journalist covering Northern Ireland politics to be killed by paramilitaries. O'Hagan, a reporter on the Dublin-based *Sunday World*, was shot dead as he returned from an evening out with his wife.

Responsibility for the murder was claimed by the Red Hand Defenders, a front name used by the paramilitary Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), which enables them to settle scores whilst claiming to be still upholding their ceasefire under the 1997 Good Friday Agreement.

Although O'Hagan appears to have been targeted because he was working on an exposure of LVF drug running, his killing is part of a general increase in sectarian violence. North Belfast has been the scene of almost continuous rioting over the past weeks.

Access for Catholic children to Holy Cross School, which entails walking through a Protestant neighbourhood, has sparked violent confrontations over the last three months. The heavy police protection afforded the children and their parents has led to running battles between Protestant protestors and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), as well as pipe bomb attacks on Catholic homes.

In a pointed statement, RUC Chief Constable Ronnie Flanagan directly attributed the violence to the UDA. More than 50 RUC officers have been injured in the protests, which have seen the security forces using plastic bullets. Nationalist gunmen have also fired on police and Protestant homes in the area.

The latest escalation in violence coincides with the political fall-out from the September 11 terror attacks on New York and Washington. Loyalist and Unionist organisations have seized upon Bush and Blair's declaration of a "war against terrorism" to demand action against the IRA.

Writing in the *Daily Telegraph* last week, Ulster Unionist Party leader David Trimble said that recent government pronouncements now made it impossible to

hide the "glaring contradictions between the government's stance on international terrorism and on domestic paramilitarism."

"One cannot credibly fight terrorism abroad while temporising with it at home," Trimble continued, claiming that his resignation three months ago as Northern Ireland's First Minister was due to Blair's failure to insist on the IRA decommissioning its weapons.

Newly elected Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan Smith endorsed Trimble's stand. Both feel emboldened in their demands by the arrests in August of three suspected IRA members in Colombia, accused of training anti-government guerrillas. The IRA has denied that its leading Army Council had any involvement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which is on the US State Department's list of designated terrorist organisations, but its carefully worded statement was regarded by many as leaving open the possibility that some other leadership body may have been involved in training the Colombian guerrillas as part of a commercial contract.

The arrests could prove severely damaging to the IRA, and its political wing Sinn Féin, not only because they undermine its claim to have ceased military activity. More importantly, they implicate the IRA in guerrilla warfare in what the US considers to be its backyard, thus bringing the Irish Republican movement into conflict with its most important political backers.

Under President Bill Clinton, Washington became a prime sponsor of the efforts to establish a power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland under the Good Friday Agreement. America has extensive economic interests in the Irish Republic, but its ability to exploit this advantageous position had been greatly limited by the ongoing sectarian conflict in the North. Utilising its links with the Irish government and Sinn Féin, which receives much of its finances from the Irish-American diaspora, the US government pressed for an accommodation between the Republicans, the British government and the Unionist parties that would enable the creation of a more

stable framework for international investment across the whole island.

Since the agreement was signed, however, conflicting interests continue to rage, with IRA weapons decommissioning being the major issue of contention. Britain and the Unionist parties insist that the IRA hand over its weapons, in order to confirm Republican acceptance of Northern Ireland's continuing status as part of the UK.

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, the Unionists have upped the ante, demanding that the measures being used to freeze Osama bin Laden's financial assets should also be employed to prevent Sinn Fein/IRA from fundraising. On Monday, the Unionist parties in the Assembly succeeded in tabling a motion to exclude Sinn Fein ministers from the Stormont Executive unless the IRA begins "credible" decommissioning. The motion is unlikely to succeed, as it would require cross-party support to be carried. But unless a resolution is found, the UUP has threatened to withdraw from the Executive, causing the collapse of the whole Assembly.

For Sinn Fein/IRA, what is more important is the stance of the US government. Decommissioning had never previously been a US requirement in its support for Sinn Fein and the Good Friday Agreement. More important was proof of Sinn Fein's intent to act as a responsible bourgeois party, defending the interests of big business against the social and political demands of working people throughout Ireland.

Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams went to great pains to stress his party's credentials in this respect. The organisation has signed up to the new power-sharing structures, accepting both British rule over the six counties and imperialist domination over the island. Moreover, Adams has even sought to contrast his commitment to the Good Friday Agreement with the petty, narrow mindedness of the Unionists.

Such proclamations became especially important with the installation of a Republican administration in the US. Even before September 11, there were indications that relations between Sinn Fein and Washington were cooling; allegations of links between the IRA and FARC, combined with Adam's intended visit to Cuba, had angered the White House. According to press reports, US envoy Richard Haass had expressed his displeasure to Adams on a recent visit to Britain and Ireland.

Following the terror attacks on New York and Washington, the IRA issued a statement pledging to accelerate its talks with the Independent International

Commission on Decommissioning.

Adams has subsequently complained that the September 11 events were being used to "gang up on Sinn Fein". What is most problematic for Adams is it appears, as part of its more aggressive global offensive, that the Bush administration has decided to place increased insistence on IRA decommissioning.

In an unprecedented move, Richard Egan became the first US ambassador to attend Sinn Fein's annual conference. In the presence of official representatives of Euskal Herritarrok, the political wing of the Basque terrorist organisation ETA, among others, Egan sat stony faced as Adams decried the US terror attacks as "ethically indefensible", whilst dismissing as "crass" any attempt to compare what had happened in New York with the IRA's refusal to decommission its arms. Afterwards Egan and Adams met privately for 10 minutes. Although no statement about their meeting was released, Irish government officials were quoted as saying that the ambassador's presence at the conference was an attempt to "reinforce the message of the Bush administration that IRA decommissioning must happen".

The further difficulties the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington are creating for Sinn Fein are evident in the pronouncements of *An Phoblacht/Republican News*. Whilst condemning the bombing, its September 12 statement had speculated that the perpetrators "may well have their origins in the political disaster area which is the Middle East. But it is a disaster area for which the 'West'... bears much responsibility." In particular, Sinn Fein singled out the "militaristic and aggressive policy by US governments" in the region.

A September 20 comment by Jim Gibney directly contradicted this statement. Whilst some argued that US foreign policy in the Middle East was the "backdrop" against which the attack took place, Gibney wrote, "that is not an acceptable argument to me". The September 11 attacks were an "act of calculated mass terrorism" that had "no place in the world of resistance to oppression".



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