Sectarian tensions lead to riots and school closures in Northern Ireland

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14 January 2002

Sectarian tensions caused serious rioting and led to the closure of several schools in north Belfast last week.

The trouble flared on January 9, following a confrontation between a Catholic and a Protestant woman outside the Holy Cross Catholic primary school on the Ardoyne Road. Access to the school had been the focus of a bitter sectarian dispute last year lasting over four months.

The Ardoyne Road is a so-called "interface" area, where predominantly Catholic and Protestant residential areas meet, with the main entrance to Holy Cross situated in what is effectively a Protestant enclave.

The school first became a flashpoint in June last year, when loyalists and nationalists both alleged that the other side was using the school route to launch attacks. Catholic parents said they were being intimidated 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 Road.

In September the dispute escalated, as loyalist protestors attempted to stop parents using the contested Ardoyne Road entrance. For 12 weeks, hundreds of police and British soldiers formed a daily security cordon, as the schoolgirls and their parents were forced to run a gauntlet of hate. The protest was called off at the end of November, when community representatives and politicians agreed to hold a series of meetings to address the various grievances, but a heavy security presence has remained in the area ever since.

According to press reports about Wednesday's incident, violence broke out when police intervened in a dispute between the two women, and attempted to arrest a Protestant woman. Crowds gathered, and cars and windows were smashed. As the situation deteriorated Holy Cross School was forced to close early, and bus its pupils home. That afternoon, a pupil at the Protestant Boys' Model Secondary School was taken to hospital after the school bus he was travelling on was attacked.

Later in the evening, rioting broke out in loyalist and nationalist areas of the Ardoyne Road, Crumlin Road and Brompton Park in Belfast. Up to 500 people were involved in the disturbances, which were mainly directed against police and security forces. According to police accounts, more than 136 petrol bombs, acid bombs and bricks were thrown at the security forces, injuring 48 officers, in what were described as "prolonged and orchestrated attacks". Police fired eight baton rounds (plastic bullets).

The following morning, masked loyalist thugs, one armed with a gun, ran amok through the grounds of Our Lady of Mercy Catholic girls' secondary school, just 500 yards from Holy Cross. While one kept watch at the gate, six others set about parked cars with crowbars. Up to 20 cars were damaged while pupils and their teachers looked on in terror from the school building. When news of the attack broke, horrified parents rushed to the school to collect their children.

Later that day, police used armoured vehicles to escort schoolboys from the Protestant Boys' Model Secondary School through nationalist crowds that had gathered on the Crumlin Road. Other schools in the area also closed early.

Despite a major security operation, serious violence continued Thursday evening in the mainly Catholic Ardoyne area. Reports state that 300 nationalist youths fought with police and troops, and cars and vans were torched.

British, Irish and American politicians issued anxious

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appeals for calm, claiming that the violence jeopardised the "great gains" made by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which established the power-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly.

Northern Ireland Secretary John Reid said he "utterly condemned" the violence, whilst Sinn Fein MP and Education Minister in the Assembly Martin McGuinness described events at Holy Cross as "deeply disturbing".

"This violence is traumatising our children and sowing the seeds of sectarian hatred and division in future generations. The only way to resolve differences is through dialogue," McGuinness said.

Local MP Nigel Dodds, from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which opposes the Good Friday Agreement, said, "Clearly there are those with a political agenda who are intent on causing trouble, and the community must not fall into that trap."

Many commentators have noted that most of those involved in the rioting are teenagers—the very ones, according to the politicians, who would enjoy a more prosperous and peaceful future as a result of the new power-sharing arrangements. Contrary to the official pronouncements, the Good Friday Agreement has done nothing to resolve the historic issues at the heart of Northern Ireland's sectarian divide. Aimed primarily at creating a more stable framework for the transnational corporations, the Agreement, drawn up between the British, Irish and US governments, has largely benefited big business and its political representatives. To enable the loyalist and nationalist parties to take up positions within the new arrangements, the Agreement enshrines sectarianism as the basis of political life. The constitutional provisions of the Northern Ireland Assembly recognise the loyalist and nationalist parties as the legitimate representatives of two essentially opposed religious communities, by giving them a mutual veto on all major legislation.

Within this framework, the new structures have only encouraged a competition between Catholic and Protestants for already scarce social and economic resources. Many young people, from both religious denominations, have seen no real social gains from the Agreement, nor any moves to integrate the two communities.

The various paramilitary organisations have sought to strengthen their de facto control over certain districts, by deliberately provoking sectarian tensions. Loyalist terror gangs are responsible for two-thirds of all recent sectarian attacks, and there is evidence showing that the Holy Cross dispute has been fanned by internecine feuding between rival loyalist groups, the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF)—both opponents of the Good Friday Agreement.

According to the nationalist newspaper *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, turf warfare between the two elsewhere in Belfast had led to a large number of UDA members being displaced into the formally UVF-controlled Glenbryn area. The dispute over access to Holy Cross originally began when a Catholic parent objected to UDA flags being erected outside the school, the paper claimed, "Amidst the ensuing paramilitary rivalry, a campaign of anti-Catholic sectarianism, including the blockade of Holy Cross, acted as recruiting sergeant for the UDA".

At the weekend, the UDA announced that it was responsible for the murder of a Catholic postman in Newtownabbey. Twenty year-old Daniel McColgan was shot by UDA gunman as he arrived at his depot on Saturday morning. A statement issued by the Red Hand Defenders—a cover name used by loyalist paramilitaries—said all Catholic postal workers were now considered "legitimate targets". The group had early issued a similar threat to Catholic teachers and others working at Catholic schools.

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