

WORLD

# Amid threats, Northern Ireland clings to peace

On a somber St. Patrick's Day, Belfast carries on as extremists try to end a decade of calm.

By Don Duncan, Contributor to The Christian Science Monitor | MARCH 18, 2009



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BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND — This year's St. Patrick's day parade weaved through a [Belfast](#) wrestling once again with its old sectarian demons.

Attacks on British soldiers and a Northern Irish policeman over the past two weeks by dissident republican groups are testing the strength of the Northern Irish peace process and are bringing dark memories into sharp focus for many Roman Catholics and Protestants.

"These attacks have served to remind us all of what we don't want to go back to," said [David Power](#), as he stood on the sidewalk watching the parade pass, a small Irish flag hanging limply from his hand. "It shows us all how fragile the peace here really is, something I think we were beginning to take for granted."



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Mr. Power is a Catholic from [Londonderry](#), a city hit hard by violence during the three decades of violence. The recent killings, he said, "took me back to when I was growing up."

Paradegoers spoke of the recent attacks as isolated events, a mere bump in the road. But security experts and community leaders say this is could be just the beginning of a planned campaign by dissident republican groups, like the [Real IRA](#) and [Continuity IRA](#), which claimed responsibility for the recent violence. Along with emerging loyalist groups – fueled by retaliatory desires – the extremists appear bent on stoking dormant sectarian hatreds and imploding the province's decade-old peace.

"These developments represent a substantial threat, and one that is not going to be dealt with in just 24 hours," says [David Bernside](#), a deputy of [Northern Ireland's](#) legislative assembly and member of the [Ulster Unionist Party](#). "What we have here are very



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sophisticated organizations capable of murder, so it will take some time to deal with them."

The recent murders are the latest in a year-long string of attacks by dissident republican groups against the police and Army, including at least 10 failed murder attempts involving drive-by shootings, car bombs, booby traps, and even homemade rocket-propelled grenades.

According to a security source familiar with policing in Northern Ireland, who spoke on condition of anonymity, patterns emerged from these failed attempts that are informing the investigations of the recent killings.

Many of the attacks targeted Catholic police officers, the security source said. "All the individuals attacked were well known in their areas for having joined the [[Police Service of Northern Ireland](#)]. They were proud of joining the police and made no secret of it."

This included [Stephen Carroll](#), the Catholic policeman shot March 9 by the Continuity IRA.



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The recent attacks are not only an effort to destabilize the peace process, but they're also viewed as an assault on deep reforms to policing in the province, which sought to better mirror the region's demographics by hiring more Catholic police officers.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) has replaced the [Royal Ulster Constabulary](#) (RUC) as the province's police force. It continues to battle a lingering distrust among some Catholic communities, a legacy of the "Troubles" when the Protestant-dominated RUC was reviled and distrusted by many Catholics, who viewed it as a repressive instrument of British power.

Now, these Catholic communities and their ability to overcome this traditional distrust of the police are crucial in the fight to contain the emerging threat facing peace here.

"The question is will information be passed on by Catholic communities so that terrorists can be convicted?" says Mr. Bernside. "It has been a problem in the past, and even if information is passed on, republicans have been very good at intimidating witnesses in the past."

Building trust and confidence in the police among the nationalist and



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republican community takes time, says [Daithí McKay](#), a [Sinn Féin](#) member of Northern Ireland's legislative assembly. "The police have to be mindful of this and not use strategies that will foster distrust, such as inappropriately using antiterrorism legislation to harass members of community, which has been happening."



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So far, the loyalist community, including militant groups like the [Ulster Freedom Fighters](#) (UFF), are heeding their political leadership and resisting retaliation, but additional dissident republican attacks, which intelligence sources say are imminent, will test this restraint.

Dissident loyalist groups are now beginning to emerge, one calling itself the Real UFF, which claims to have operations against republican targets already under way. Indeed, security analysts say loyalist retaliation against the republican leadership is a top concern.

"It's a real concern for our community," says Mr. McKay, of Sinn Féin.

"What we need now is more discussion with loyalist leaders so as to mitigate any possibility of attacks on the nationalist and republican community."

[James Steadman](#) looked a bit lost amid the hoopla of the parade as it

wended its way out of Donegall Place Tuesday afternoon. Mr. Steadman, a Protestant from Belfast, found himself caught up in the parade by accident. He had come into the city to buy some religious books and took a wrong turn. Still, he appeared to be enjoying the celebration.

"I saw Northern Ireland before the 'Troubles' and I saw it fall apart, and I never thought I'd see peace here again," he said, smiling. "Northern Ireland is different now. Sinn Féin are on board. The police has changed. There is no way we can go back to the dark days." ■



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