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Northern Ireland: The Peace Process

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Summary

For years, the British and Irish governments sought to facilitate a peaceful settlement to the conflict in Northern Ireland. After many ups and downs, the two governments and the eight parties participating in peace talks announced an agreement on April 10, 1998. However, the implementation of the resulting Good Friday Agreement continues to be difficult. This report will be updated as events warrant.

Overview

Since 1969, over 3,200 people have died as a result of political violence in Northern Ireland, which is a part of the United Kingdom. The conflict, which has its origins in the 1921 division of Ireland, has reflected a struggle between different national, cultural, and religious identities.¹ The Protestant majority (53%) in Northern Ireland defines itself as British and largely supports continued incorporation in the UK (unionists). The Catholic minority (44%) considers itself Irish, and many Catholics desire a united Ireland (nationalists). For years, the British and Irish governments sought to facilitate a political settlement. The Good Friday Agreement was reached on April 10, 1998. It calls for devolved government — the transfer of power from London to Belfast — and establishes a Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive Committee in which unionists and nationalists share power, a North-South Ministerial Council, and a British-Irish Council. It also contains provisions on decommissioning (disarmament), policing, human rights, security normalization, and prisoners, and recognizes that a change in Northern Ireland's status can only come about with the consent of the majority of its people. Voters in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland approved the accord in referendums on May 22, 1998. Elections to the new Assembly took place on June 25, 1998.

Nonetheless, implementation of the peace agreement has been difficult. Instability in the devolved government has been the rule rather than the exception. Unionists remain

¹ In 1921, the mostly Catholic, southern part of Ireland won independence from Britain. The resulting Republic of Ireland occupies about five-sixths of the island of Ireland; Northern Ireland occupies the remaining one-sixth. For more background, see CRS Report RL30368, *Northern Ireland: Implementation of the Peace Agreement during the 106th Congress*, by Karen Donfried.

concerned about the IRA's commitment to non-violence, while nationalists worry about the pace of demilitarization, police reforms, and ongoing loyalist paramilitary activity.

Decommissioning, Devolved Government, and Recurrent Crises

After 27 years of direct rule from London, authority over local affairs was transferred to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive on December 1, 1999. But on February 11, 2000, London suspended the devolved government because the Assembly's First Minister, then-Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader David Trimble, was poised to resign to protest the absence of IRA decommissioning. UK officials worried that Trimble would have been replaced by someone less supportive of, if not opposed to, the peace agreement. In May 2000, the UUP voted to reinstate the power-sharing institutions following an IRA pledge to put its arms "beyond use"; the Assembly reconvened in June 2000.

Unionists remained frustrated, however, by the IRA's lack of decommissioning. The June 7, 2001 general and local elections in Northern Ireland saw the more extremist Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the IRA-linked Sinn Fein party gaining on the UUP and the moderate nationalist Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP). With no IRA disarmament, Trimble resigned as First Minister on July 1, 2001. London suspended the devolved government on August 10 for 24 hours to avoid calling new elections, which it feared would result in additional gains for hardliners. The Assembly can go no longer than six weeks without a First Minister, or new elections must be called. The brief suspension reset the clock, giving negotiators another six weeks to try to avert the collapse of Belfast's political institutions.

In mid-August 2001, Colombian authorities arrested three suspected IRA members on charges of training FARC guerrillas to use explosives. The FARC is a 15,000-strong force that conducts attacks against the Colombian government and U.S. interests. Given U.S. efforts to help counter the FARC, Washington was troubled by the IRA's alleged ties to this group. But after the September 11 terrorist attacks, "President Bush declared war against international terrorism ... If the IRA wanted to hold on to their weapons any longer, the Americans would simply have none of it," according to an Irish diplomat.² Sinn Fein was facing political isolation and the loss of private American financial support.

Negotiations among Sinn Fein, London, and Dublin continued. On September 21, 2001, London suspended the Assembly again for 24 hours to buy more time. Finally, on October 23, following a public call for IRA decommissioning by Sinn Fein, the IRA announced that it reportedly had put a quantity of weapons "beyond use" to "save the peace process." In response, the UUP decided to rejoin the power-sharing executive. London began dismantling several more army watchtowers and promised to devise an amnesty arrangement for nationalist fugitives. On November 5, David Trimble was reelected First Minister; SDLP leader Mark Durkan was reelected Deputy First Minister.

² As quoted in Kevin Cullen, "Sinn Fein Prods IRA on Disarming," *Boston Globe*, Oct. 23, 2001. In April 2004, the IRA suspects were found not guilty on the charges of training the FARC, but this verdict was overturned in December 2004 and the three suspects fled Colombia. In August 2005, they surfaced in the Republic of Ireland. Also see House International Relations Committee, "International Global Terrorism: Its Links with Illicit Drugs as Illustrated by the IRA and Other Groups in Colombia," 107th Cong., 2nd sess., Serial No. 107-87, Apr. 24, 2002.

Relative calm prevailed in early 2002. By March, the British had closed seven more military bases, bringing the total number vacated to 48 out of 105. On April 8, the IRA carried out a second act of decommissioning. Still, worries about the IRA's long-term commitment to the peace process persisted following allegations that the IRA was buying new weapons, updating its "hit list," and was behind the theft of intelligence documents from a Belfast police barracks. On October 4, police raided Sinn Fein's Assembly offices and arrested four officials as part of an investigation into a suspected IRA spy ring. The UUP and DUP were outraged, and threatened to withdraw from the government unless Sinn Fein was expelled. Sinn Fein rejected all of the charges against its members.

On October 14, 2002, London suspended Belfast's devolved government and reinstated direct rule. Since then, London and Dublin have led talks with Northern Ireland's political parties to try to find a way forward. Both UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern emphasize that "acts of completion" are necessary. On April 23, 2003, Blair asserted that the IRA still needed to indicate whether it intended to end all activities, put all of its arms beyond use, and ensure a final closure of the conflict. On May 1, London postponed Northern Ireland's May 29 Assembly elections to give the parties more time to negotiate. At the same time, London and Dublin published a "Joint Declaration," which called for a further drawdown of UK forces, devolution of policing and justice, and an end to paramilitarism and sectarian violence; they also outlined a deal for "on-the-run" fugitives, and an independent body to monitor paramilitary ceasefires and political party compliance with the peace accord. To keep up political momentum, Blair and Ahern sought to implement some parts of the Joint Declaration ahead of a final deal; demolition of two more army watchtowers began on May 9, and steps were taken to establish the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC).

A deal to restore devolution appeared near in the fall of 2003. On October 21, 2003, London set November 26 as the date for the Assembly elections. Within hours, Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams declared his party's "total and absolute commitment to exclusively democratic and peaceful means" and called for all guns to be "taken out of Irish society." The IRA asserted that Adams "accurately reflects our position" and announced a third act of decommissioning. However, Trimble criticized the lack of details about the type and quantity of arms disposed, and put further progress "on hold."

On November 26, 2003, voters in Northern Ireland went to the polls despite the deadlock over devolution. The largely anti-agreement DUP — led by the Reverend Ian Paisley — overtook the UUP as the dominant unionist party in the Assembly. Sinn Fein surpassed the more moderate SDLP to become the largest nationalist party.³ On January 5, 2004, UUP rebel Jeffrey Donaldson defected to the DUP, along with two other UUP members, increasing the number of DUP seats further. The DUP asserted that it would not enter into government with Sinn Fein until the IRA disarms and disbands.

Most analysts predicted that the election results would make restoring devolution more difficult. Negotiations remained stalemated for much of 2004. In September 2004, Prime Ministers Blair and Ahern led intensive talks with the parties. Although they concluded without a deal, London and Dublin believed that the IRA was ready to

³ For more information, see CRS Report RS21692, *Northern Ireland: The 2003 Election*, by Kristin Archick.

guarantee an end to paramilitary activity and the completion of decommissioning. In November 2004, London and Dublin presented compromise proposals to Sinn Fein and the DUP to help resolve remaining issues. The transparency of the decommissioning process re-emerged as a major stumbling block. The DUP called for photographic evidence to be taken and published, but Sinn Fein and the IRA balked, viewing these demands as an attempt to humiliate the IRA. Efforts to restore devolution were further complicated by a bank robbery in Belfast on December 20, 2004, which police say was carried out by the IRA. The IRA denies being involved.

Sinn Fein and the IRA also came under increased pressure to address the issue of IRA criminality following the murder of Belfast man Robert McCartney during a bar brawl in late January 2005. The IRA expelled three members, and Sinn Fein suspended seven others, accused of being involved. On March 8, 2005, the IRA announced that it had offered to shoot four men directly involved in the McCartney killing; the McCartney family declined this offer, which was strongly condemned by London, Dublin, and Washington. On April 6, Adams effectively called on the IRA to abandon violence and pursue politics as an “alternative” to “armed struggle.” Some viewed Adams’ remarks as a ploy to bolster Sinn Fein ahead of the UK’s general election on May 5, 2005. The DUP won nine seats in the UK Parliament, while the UUP lost five of its six seats, including Trimble’s. Sinn Fein, with five seats, has a two-seat lead over the SDLP. Trimble resigned as UUP leader and has been replaced by Sir Reg Empey.

On July 28, 2005, the IRA ordered an end to its armed campaign. It instructed all members to pursue objectives through “exclusively peaceful means” and to “not engage in any other activities whatsoever.” All IRA units were ordered to dump arms, and the IRA stated that two witnesses from the Protestant and Catholic clergy would verify its decommissioning process, in addition to the international monitors. The British, Irish, and U.S. governments welcomed the IRA’s statement but cautioned that words must be followed by deeds. London began dismantling several security posts, and announced plans to halve the number of British troops in Northern Ireland to 5,000 by August 2007, despite unionist opposition. Although many analysts asserted that the IRA’s statement was the least ambiguous one ever, unionists were wary, noting that it did not explicitly address the issue of IRA criminality nor whether the IRA would disband.⁴

On September 26, 2005, Northern Ireland’s Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) announced that the IRA had put all of its arms beyond use, asserting that the IRA weaponry dismantled or made inoperable matched estimates provided by the security forces. The DUP and other unionists have condemned the lack of details on the quantity of weapons destroyed and remain skeptical, but London and Dublin appear to believe that the IRA as an organization is now incapable of carrying out a major attack or destabilizing Northern Ireland politics. On February 1, 2006, an IMC report asserted that the IRA seemed to be moving in the right direction, but some evidence indicated that the IRA remained involved in intelligence-gathering and criminal activities; the IMC also noted that it had received reports that some IRA members had retained a limited number of weapons, mostly for personal use. The IICD, however, announced that it had investigated such claims of weapons retention, and found them to be false. The

⁴ “A Long Time Coming,” *Irish Times*, July 29, 2005. For the text of the IRA’s July 28, 2005 statement, see BBC News [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/4724599.stm].

British and Irish governments responded positively to the IMC's report, maintaining that it demonstrated "enough progress" to make the "process of talking meaningful." Nevertheless, ongoing negotiations to restore the devolved government appear deadlocked still; the DUP continues to insist in the wake of the IMC report that the IRA has not lived up to its commitments and refuses to talk to Sinn Fein directly until the IRA disbands.⁵

Implementing Police Reforms

The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) — Northern Ireland's former, 92% Protestant police force — was long viewed by Catholics as an enforcer of Protestant domination. The peace agreement called for an independent commission to help "ensure policing arrangements, including composition, recruitment, training, culture, ethos and symbols, are such that ... Northern Ireland has a police service that can enjoy widespread support from ... the community as a whole." In June 1998, Prime Minister Blair appointed Chris Patten to head this commission. In September 1999, the Patten Commission released a report with 175 recommendations. It proposed a new name for the RUC, a new badge, and new symbols free of the British or Irish states. Other key measures included reducing the size of the force from 11,400 to 7,500, and increasing the proportion of Catholic officers. Unionists responded negatively, but nationalists were mostly positive.

In May 2000, the Blair government introduced the Police Bill in the House of Commons. Nationalists were critical, arguing that Patten's proposals had been gutted. London responded that amendments would deal with human rights training, promoting 50-50 recruitment of Catholics and Protestants, and oversight responsibilities. The Police Bill became law on November 23, 2000. While some nationalist concerns had been addressed, Sinn Fein and the SDLP asserted that the reforms did not go far enough. In March 2001, recruiting began for the future Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). To help ensure nationalist support, London proposed further concessions in July 2001, which included halving the anti-terrorist "Special Branch."

In August 2001, the SDLP broke with Sinn Fein and accepted the British revisions; the SDLP agreed to nominate representatives to the Policing Board, a democratic oversight body. Despite Sinn Fein's continued opposition, the Policing Board came into being on November 4, 2001. That same day, the RUC was renamed the PSNI, and the first class of recruits drawn 50-50 from both communities began their training. Sinn Fein maintains that the changes are largely cosmetic. Some say Sinn Fein's absence from the Policing Board discourages Catholics from joining the PSNI. To assuage nationalist concerns further, London outlined plans in November 2002 for new policing legislation to provide more public accountability and eventually allow former paramilitaries to sit on Northern Ireland's new District Policing Partnerships (DPPs), which seek to foster greater local involvement in policing. Paramilitary participation would be conditional on other "acts of completion." DPPs came into being in March 2003. The Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2003 received Royal Assent in April 2003. In late November 2004, Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams met with PSNI chief Hugh Orde for the first time in the context of the search for a comprehensive deal to restore devolution.

⁵ "IRA Arms: What Next for NI Politics?," BBC News, September 26, 2005; "Governments Welcome Positive Report on IRA," *Irish Times*, February 2, 2006.

U.S. Policy

The Bush Administration views the Good Friday Agreement as the best framework for a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. U.S. officials assert that trust and confidence can only be rebuilt if the IRA and other paramilitaries “go out of business.” They also stress that Sinn Féin must join the Policing Board. The Bush Administration reacted positively to the IRA’s July 2005 statement that it was ending its armed struggle, and called the announcement that the IRA had fully decommissioned a “critical first step” in translating its words into concrete action. Members of Congress actively support the peace process. Encouraged by the progress on police reforms, Members prompted the Administration in December 2001 to lift a ban on contacts between the FBI and the new PSNI. Congress had initiated this prohibition in 1999 because of the former RUC’s human rights record. Some Members remain concerned with human rights and accountability issues in Northern Ireland. Recent hearings have focused on the status of public inquiries into four high-profile murders in Northern Ireland, including the 1989 slaying of Belfast attorney Patrick Finucane, and the peace process.⁶ The United States has provided aid through the International Fund for Ireland since 1986 and is an important source of investment.

Recent Legislation

H.Res. 555 expresses support for the 1998 Good Friday Agreement for Northern Ireland. Introduced by Representative Walsh, November 15, 2005.

P.L. 109-102 (Nov. 14, 2005) appropriates \$13.5 million for the International Fund for Ireland as part of the FY2006 foreign operations spending measure. Introduced as H.R. 3057 by Representative Kolbe, June 24, 2005.

S. 1935 authorizes appropriations of \$20 million per year for FY2006-FY2007 for the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) and encourages the IFI to support programs related to policing reform. Introduced by Senator Santorum, October 27, 2005.

H.R. 2601 authorizes Department of State appropriations for FY2006-FY2007, including \$100,000 per year for training and advisory support for the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, and \$20 million per year for the International Fund for Ireland. Introduced by Representative Smith, May 24, 2005; passed House, July 20, 2005.

S.Res 173 (July 13, 2005) expresses support for the 1998 Good Friday Agreement as the blueprint for lasting peace in Northern Ireland. **S.Res. 84** (Mar. 17, 2005) condemns IRA violence and criminality. Both introduced by Senator Kennedy.

P.L. 108-449 (Dec. 10, 2004) amends and extends the Irish Peace Process Cultural and Training Program Act of 1998 through FY2008 to provide job and conflict resolution training to persons from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Introduced as H.R. 2655 by Representative Walsh, June 26, 2003.

⁶ See House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights, and International Operations, “Northern Ireland Human Rights: Update on the Cory Collusion Inquiry Reports,” 109th Congress, 1st sess., March 16, 2005; and House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Europe and Emerging Threats, “Northern Ireland: Prospects for the Peace Process,” 109th Congress, 1st sess., May 25, 2005.