Dispatches
August 03, 2005

Northern Ireland: Are the Troubles Over?
BY Niall McKay

Traditional British black cabs line up in Belfast city center.

We Irish love euphemisms. A "soft day" means that it's raining, "the Struggle" means armed insurrection, and "the Troubles" refers to 36 years of bombings, shootings and killings that claimed 3,700 lives. So you can be forgiven for wondering, "What does the IRA really mean when it says that it is ending its 'armed campaign'?"

"Last week, Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, ordered its members to destroy their weapons and not "engage in any other activities whatsoever." "Did that include criminal activity?" asked one journalist at the press conference. "What part of 'any other activities' do you not understand?" retorted Sinn Fein's president, Gerry Adams.

In response, the British government began to dismantle its army bases, announcing that it will reduce its troop presence to peacetime numbers and repeal antiterrorism legislation, bringing to an end nearly four decades of what was effectively martial law in Northern Ireland. While it would be naive to believe that there will be no more killings -- so far the IRA and their Unionist (those who want to preserve the Union with Britain) counterparts have each killed about 1,700 people since the beginning of the Troubles -- it's still very good news for the peace process.

In the early 1990s, I spent a lot of time in Northern Ireland. I'd often take the train from Dublin to Belfast. Frequently on those journeys, we would be taken off the train and bussed for 10 miles because the IRA had blown up the track. Traveling by car, we'd be stopped by British army roadblocks several times and asked where we were going, where we had come from, and who we had been with. Arriving in Belfast was like landing in the middle of a war zone. Downtown Belfast, although one of the friendliest places in Ireland, was a shocking mess. Bombed-out buildings were boarded up; barriers of barbed wire separated various parts of the city; soldiers scarcely more than children (the British army recruits at 16) stood with machine guns at the ready, sizing us up with a mixture of suspicion and fear. It was difficult then to see any end to the violence.

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Now there's a different climate in the province, which occupies the six counties in the topmost corner of the island of Ireland. Belfast, once to Northern Ireland what Beirut was to Lebanon, has undergone a similar transformation. There's a construction boom, property prices are on the rise, and the unemployment rate is going down. As a result, many of the Catholic community's old grievances, which had little to do with either religion or a united Ireland, have been addressed. The Royal Ulster Constabulary, the militarized police force feared and hated by the Catholic community, has been revamped and replaced with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, whose new recruits are more likely to be civilians looking for a job rather than those having an ax to grind.

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After listening to Seanna Walsh -- a man who spent more than half of his life in prison for services to the IRA -- deliver the terse statement on television last week, I called people in Northern Ireland to get their reaction. Jonathan McCambridge, a crime correspondent with *The Belfast Telegraph*, told me, "The big question for many people here is, can the leopard change its spots? Many of the Unionists felt that it was too much too soon -- that the British government should wait six months before they close army bases." McCambridge said he could see the results of the announcement happening right in front of him. "At the minute, I am looking at the British army dismantle the army base on top of the Divis Flats [the Catholic housing project]. So already there is a change in the city."

Those who have lived through decades of violence rightly question whether the IRA is truly giving up its terror campaign or whether this is more political shenanigans. Both are probably true. Sinn Fein has lost a great deal of credibility recently because the IRA was implicated in the biggest bank robbery in British history as well as in the killing of a Catholic, Robert McCartney, in a bar last January. Barroom brawls are hardly a new facet of Irish life -- even those in which someone loses a life -- but the murder of McCartney was significant because the IRA intimidated witnesses and destroyed evidence. In other words, it was up to its old tricks.

But even the IRA now realizes that ending the violence is a smart move. Sinn Fein is trying to rebrand itself as a political party -- it's the fastest-growing party in the Republic of Ireland -- so that it can fight for seats in the republic's 2007 general election.

In fact, the Irish government announced last weekend that it would create a process whereby elected representatives in Northern Ireland would be allowed to debate issues in the Republic of Ireland's parliament in Dublin.

The political will is there, but there are still a number of hurdles to be crossed in order to keep the peace this time around. Policing is a major concern. The vacuum left by the IRA is likely to spark a brand-new power struggle. According to the Irish newspaper *The Sunday Business Post*, a small number of the 600 IRA members feel sidelined by the political process. Some are likely to join one of the splinter groups, such as the Continuity IRA or even the Real IRA, a particularly violent faction linked to the Omagh bombing, which in 1998 killed 29 people and injured hundreds more, in

Northern Ireland's worst day of terror.

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For decades the IRA saw its role as both protecting and policing the Catholic community. Anyone involved in criminal activity that the IRA did not approve of was told to leave the province or face the consequences -- punishment that could include beatings, kneecapping, even death.

"What happens when somebody steps out of line?" asked one Belfast man on RTE, Ireland's public radio station. "When a man used to step out of line, they used to shoot him or beat him. What are they going to do now?"

Another problem is the Protestant paramilitary groups -- rival terrorist groups set up to counter the IRA. They have made little effort to join the political process and no moves to either decommission their weapons or stop criminal activity.

A senior loyalist close to the Loyalist Volunteer Force, a paramilitary group, told a Belfast newspaper last week, "If there's no IRA, then there's no need for loyalist paramilitaries. But the problem is that today, people are in the paramilitary world because it's their living."

I also called Peter O'Neil, one of the first Irish friends I made when I moved from Ireland to San Francisco in 1997. He had witnessed the Bloody Sunday massacre in 1972, when a British parachute regiment fired on civilians who were peacefully demonstrating in the Catholic Bogside region in Londonderry, killing 13 people. Some of them were O'Neil's friends.

"This is one of the final parts of the slow dance between the IRA and the authorities, but it's not going to happen overnight," he said. "The fundamental problem now is how they are going to control the Catholic working-class neighborhoods, which have been policed by the IRA for the past 30 years."

The new reality is that the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland is disappearing. "The European Union is becoming more important now," he said.

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For me, it does feel like a historic moment -- not just because the IRA has said it's time to quit, but also because in the last decade, the sectarian violence has almost completely stopped. The city that I once knew, one where if you were Irish or English you had to be extra careful which pub you drank in or which taxicab you took home (the cab companies were segregated) has changed. So has the religious makeup.

Northern Ireland once had a million Protestants and half a million Catholics; today, it's fast approaching a 50-50 mix. Thirty years of equal education and employment opportunities have evened the playing field. In fact, you could argue that the biggest contributor to the peace process in recent years has been the opportunity for both communities to earn a decent living. After all, that's what many such struggles come down to in the end, a competition for resources. If Northern Ireland continues to reap

the benefits of prosperity, perhaps there is a chance that Ireland's Troubles are a thing of the past.

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