

# Riots hit Northern Ireland

By Richard Tyler  
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Loyalist marches in Northern Ireland have sparked some of the worst rioting in recent years. Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) units used water canon and plastic bullets, after being attacked with petrol bombs and other missiles. According to press reports, over 100 (RUC) officers were injured in clashes with loyalists and republicans.

July 12 is the culmination of the “marching season”, when supporters of the pro-British loyalist movement take to the streets to celebrate the ascendancy of Protestant King William of Orange in 1690 over the Catholic forces of King James at the battle of the Boyne.

Loyalists protested at a number of sites where marches were banned or rerouted by the Parades Commission, clashing with the police in Portadown, County Armagh on Wednesday night.

On Thursday, up to 100,000 participated in Orange Order marches at 19 sites across the North, and incidents broke out at several spots in Belfast. At the Ormeau Bridge, some 80 Orangemen and their supporters protested at being prevented from marching down the largely Catholic lower Ormeau Road. There were also loyalist protests against the rerouting of the Orange march in Derry, Northern Ireland’s second largest city, away from Catholic districts.

In the republican Ardoyne district, nationalist protesters attacked RUC officers protecting Orangemen returning from the main parade in Belfast. Police fired 40 plastic bullets and deployed two water canon. Nationalist protestors also battled with police trying to keep them away from Orangemen marching on the Crumlin Road. Police responded using plastic bullets, resulting in several injuries, according to those protesting.

The riots came in the midst of talks being held in England to try and preserve the Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland Assembly, set up

under its auspices, which allows for power-sharing within a limited form of devolved government.

The resignation of Assembly First Minister David Trimble, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), on July 1, triggered the collapse of the power-sharing Executive. Unless resolved by August 12, a new First Minister will have to be appointed.

Given the growing opposition to the Agreement within the Unionist camp, reflected in the increased general election vote for Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), it is unlikely that any new First Minister would achieve the “cross-community” support required under the terms of the Assembly.

The talks, being held at Weston Park, Shropshire, have included the three largest pro-Agreement parties—the UUP, the constitutional nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Fein. Also in attendance were two smaller unionist parties—the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP)—linked to the loyalist terrorist organisations, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF).

Representatives of the PUP and UDP had walked out of the talks earlier in the week. David Ervine, leader of the PUP, which sits in the Assembly, accused the British government of “caving in” to republican demands.

The UFF, the largest loyalist terror grouping, said it was withdrawing its support for the Good Friday Agreement. Gary McMichael, who heads the UDP, the UFF’s political wing, said he felt his party had no role to play at the talks.

On Wednesday night, both the UVF and UFF organised a display of military strength, with masked gunmen firing shots into the air at bonfires held as part of the marching season. Both organisations have said they will not hand over their own weapons until the IRA begins decommissioning.

Although neither the UFF nor the UVF has indicated they are abandoning their cease-fire, many suspect that the UFF has been involved in recent attacks on Catholics, including the murder of teenager Ciaran Cummings, killed as he waited for a lift to work on July 4. Sinn Fein representative Alex Maskey said, "The reality on the ground for some time has been the UFF orchestrating and carrying out attacks on Catholics".

Calls for the IRA to decommission before allowing Sinn Fein to continue holding ministerial office in the Executive were intensified by Orange Order Grand Master Robert Saulters, who said it was "time to pull the plug" on the Weston Park talks. "Frankly, if there were any guts among unionists they would have walked out by now".

UUP MP Jeffrey Donaldson, who is part of Trimble's delegation and is a longstanding opponent of the Agreement within the UUP, also voiced criticism of the talks. Donaldson told demonstrating Orangemen that the talks were a "waste of time", adding that in the absence of IRA decommissioning, "the prime minister must now move to... exclude Sinn Fein".

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