



■ *The deep-seated pain and anger in this troubled province are difficult for the world to understand, but they won't go away just because of a peace agreement. Still, it would be a tragedy to lose the momentum of the last year, writes Hannah Hayes.*

## Seeking hope in N. Ireland

**B**ELFAST—The streets of Belfast are eerily quiet, like the calm before the storm.

Many here in the North have fled to the West of Ireland or to the safety and sanity of Dublin. Pubs and restaurants closed last week in anticipation of trouble and will remain closed until the current crisis passes.

The talks over the stalled Good Friday agreement adjourned days before the Protestant Orange Order began marching through Catholic districts. The tension over banned parades and subsequent protests stymied any potential progress. Politicians hesitate to commit themselves or take risks at such a volatile time. Likewise, what happens over the next week will certainly affect decisions on how to proceed.

While the British and Irish prime ministers negotiated frantically behind closed doors, newspapers around the world pleaded for the parties to come to an agreement. The world would not understand if they did not, President Clinton told the press. British Prime Minister Tony Blair warned that we were staring into the abyss and that there was no going back.

British newspapers commented that people in England were weary of the Troubles and tempted to leave Northern Ireland to sort out its own mess. Words spoken by former Sen. George Mitchell, who brokered the peace agreement last year, echoed ominously in newscasts throughout the week: "History will not forgive. . ."

On all sides, people in Northern Ireland are being told the world will not understand and history will not forgive. The deserted streets of Belfast reinforce this feeling of isolation and abandonment. Those of us who have not jumped ship to the safety of

Donegal stock up on canned goods and stay close to home lest the car be taken to add to a burning barricade.

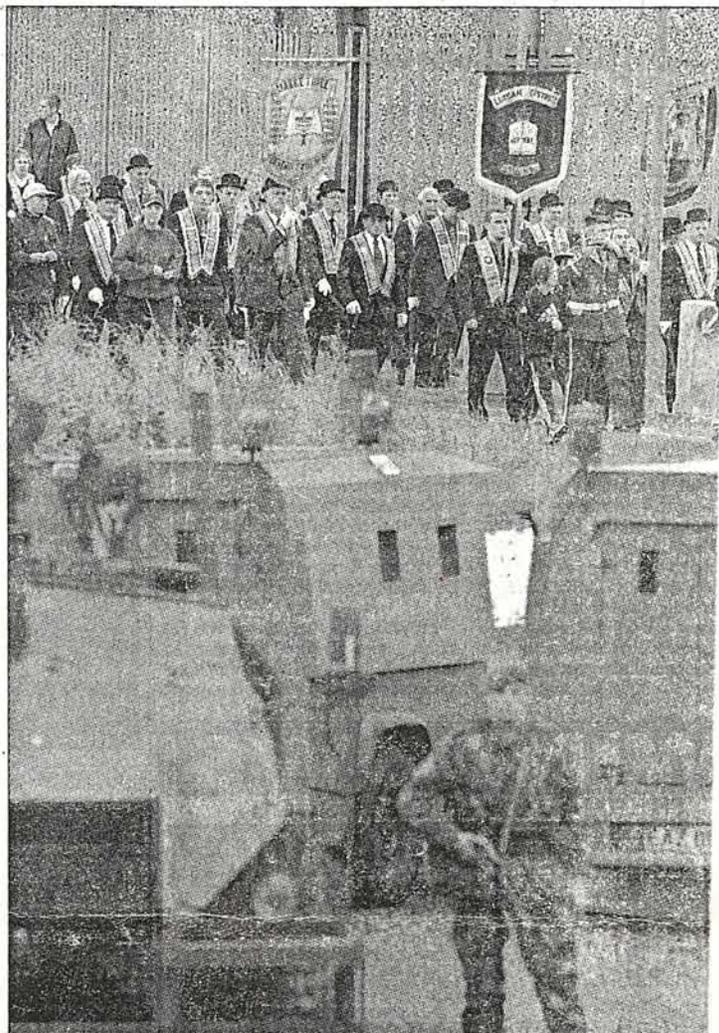
Last weekend, I read about the spree of hate killings in Illinois and Indiana by a crazed white supremacist. Those killings came at a time when I miss Chicago the most. Locked in my home in Belfast, listening nervously to the radio for news of violence, I think wistfully of Fourth of July barbecues with my family, the lakefront alive with fireworks and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra booming in the background, the colorful spectacle of Taste of Chicago.

As I read about the racist killings back home, I am watching on TV two groups of people 30 miles from Belfast separated by a concrete and steel barricade 20 feet high, acres of barbed wire and a specially made moat. Thousands of riot police and British army troops attempt to keep the Protestant Orangemen away from Catholic residents. Additional troops are on standby.

Both of these stories have made international news. Both involve hatred and bigotry that result in violence. A hatred that runs so deep is difficult for the average person to comprehend.

People in Ireland, both North and South, cannot fathom the violence Americans live with day by day. So it doesn't surprise me that the world says it will not understand if an agreement is not reached in Northern Ireland.

The people screaming at each other over the divide have a "felt" history we Americans find difficulty to understand. The devastating memories of pogroms against Catholics and the pain and anger felt by Protestants over Irish Republican Army bombs will not go away because a document was signed by political leaders.



PAUL FAITH/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Protestant Orangemen stage a protest march last month in Portadown, Northern Ireland, over a ruling banning their annual march through a Catholic neighborhood.

Because of the Troubles, Northern Ireland has had little chance to diversify or even experience the ethnic diversity Americans take for granted. Northern Ireland has been a backwater, little more than a colony patrolled by an army, for a quarter-century. With little if any investment in the economy during this time, unemployment is the highest in the United Kingdom. Few people left their communities for fear of sectarian violence.

Yet I have read and heard personally many accounts of African-American soldiers stationed in the North during World War II. Of publicans who refused to recognize the army's policy of segregation and chose to throw out the white soldiers who didn't want to drink with the blacks. An elderly soldier from the South recalls the joy when an Irish girl—a white girl—asked him to dance, and no one thought twice about it. African Americans were treated better in Ireland than they were by their own countrymen. So it's easy to shake one's head about what goes on in other people's backyards.

As an outsider and a journalist, I usually maintain a semi-objective perspective and can point to historical reasons for the divisions in Northern Ireland. But after living here for six years, the political becomes personal.

Three years ago in July, I lived in a district that had seen some of the worst rioting in 25 years. Night after night, I sat by my son's crib listening to glass shattering and watching the flames rise up over the houses. Rumors flew about people being "put out" of their homes. There were no Catholics in that district, so they turned on students who somebody decided were gay.

During those days, my neighbors had stopped talking to me. As far as I knew, people were unaware I was raised a Catholic, and nobody seemed to care that my partner was Jewish. We were just Americans. I didn't wait to see whether somebody decided we

were too "other," and even though I it wouldn't go down well if I "fled" I I camped out on the train station I hundreds of others heading for the

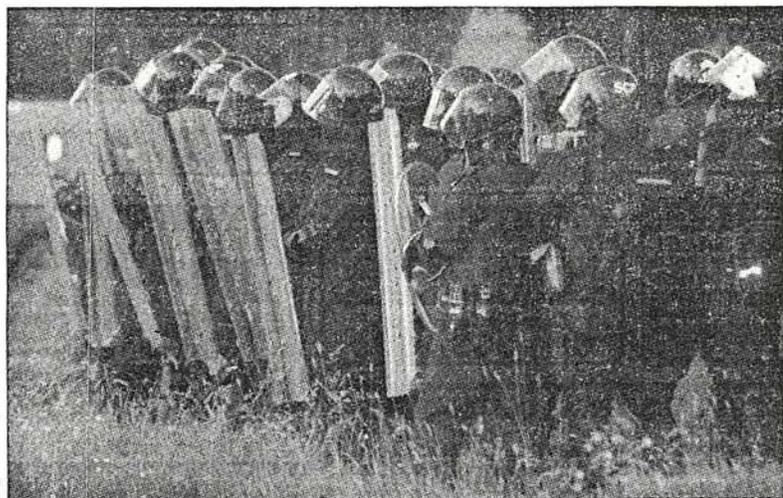
Since then, we join the exodus every Most of our friends shrug and say it it will be over by the time the Looking beyond the snarling politers and despite centuries-old divide body wants a return to violence, gets used to it. As the horrific act insane fanatic in Illinois become reminder of racism, we learn to g our everyday lives.

The Good Friday agreement meaning to the word hope. It became thing tangible and within reach talked about this beleaguered becoming a model for conflict resolution would see democracy unfold ground up with the establishment Northern Ireland Assembly and the ment structures created by it. "Pe ing" became the watchword of the

The collective self-esteem of people soared. Suddenly, their political leaders were Nobel Prize American companies wanted to in nesses sprang up in anticipation government. With the war in the and the Middle East talks collapse world looked to Northern Ireland for conflict resolution and peace I

Things changed quickly over the and it would be a real tragedy to momentum. Every act of violence weighed against the benefits of peace ended thus far and strengthens the try to remember that as I pack in Donegal.

Hannah Hayes, from the South Chicago, lives in Belfast and reports for the *Andersontown News*



PETER MORRISON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Royal Ulster Constabulary police move in force around Drumcree Parish Church in Portadown on July 4 as loyalists attempt to break through their lines.