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Bombing solidifies resolve for peace

Omagh visitors pay tribute to dead

By Marie Grady

OMAGH, Northern Ireland - Their faces stare out from a sea of flowers, and words filled with pain and rage ask a question no one can answer.

With lasting peace finally a possibility, why did so many have to die?

Two weeks and a day after a terrorist bomb killed 28 and injured more than 300 here, the site just off Market Street has become a shrine that draws visitors from as far away as the United States and from as close as a few streets away.

There is no crowd clamoring to visit this scene of bomb-ravaged stores and cafes on this day. They come in twos and threes and sometimes alone to look at a collage made from newspaper photos of young victims or to pore over the words scrawled on the packages of brightly colored bouquets and taped to stuffed animals.

Seamus O'Donnell, a cab driver from Derry, stopped after dropping off an Englishwoman whose niece lives in Omagh. The woman's niece had just finished shopping and gone home when the blast went off in a shopping area crowded with parents buying clothes for schoolchildren.

"It's touched everybody somewhere," said O'Donnell.

Ed Kelly and his wife, Millie, of Burlington County, N.J., stopped after visiting his relatives in Donegal.

"They've lost a cause with the bombing," said Kelly, speaking of the Real IRA, a splinter group of the Irish Republican Army blamed for the blast.

Kelly, whose sister-in-law lives in Enfield, Conn., and who has visited Western Massachusetts with his wife, said the couple wanted to pay their respects before ending a three-week vacation.

The commercial district is just down the street from three churches of mixed denominations, including one that bears the words, "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from sin."

The bombing marked the worst sectarian violence in the 30-year history of "The Troubles" between Catholic republican paramilitary groups who want independence from Britain and Protestant loyalist terrorists who swear allegiance to Great Britain.

The blast is believed to be an effort to shatter a historic peace accord approved in May that establishes governing ties with the predominantly Catholic Republic of Ireland.

On Thursday, President Clinton and congressmen, including Richard E. Neal, a Springfield, Mass. Democrat, are expected to offer words of encouragement to the grieving community.

"What I think is significant is that even with the tragedies of recent weeks, the (peace) agreement has held," Neal said late last week.

The bouquets at the site come from places like Cork, in the southernmost part of Ireland, London and from the youth of Shankill Road, who live in a predominantly Protestant enclave of Belfast.

The blast killed both Protestants and Catholics and prompted what British Prime Minister Tony Blair termed "Draconian" legislative proposals to convict suspected terrorists largely on the word of police. The proposed laws have drawn protests from Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Irish Republican Army, who fear a predominantly Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary police force will be too quick to arrest innocent suspects. But the laws are welcomed by Catholic residents like O'Donnell, who are willing to use any means to bring an end to the periodic violence that punctuates what is otherwise a quiet existence.

On the road into Omagh, cows graze in fields and the occasional bicyclist peddles past cars driving on the left side of the road. The only hint of what lies beyond the bend is a crude message drawn on the back of a road sign.

"Release our POWS," it says.

RUC Inspector Bob Torrens said a reconstruction of the bombing scene, including a car similar to the red Cavalier used in the blast, had yielded dozens of calls. But police late yesterday had been unable to make an arrest.

For now, visitors like Muriel Edgar of Castle Douglas, Scotland, are left to shake their heads in disgust.

Donna Lowe of London said people in England believe a lasting peace remains possible, "But I don't see it (violence) stopping soon."

In a playground just blocks from the bombing, a handful of the children of Omagh continue to climb on swings and slides just weeks after the tragedy claimed some classmates and friends and relations of their parents. Debra O'Donnell, 12, and her brother Ryan, 9, were playing when they heard a huge boom and saw smoke.

The bombing killed their mother's cousin, whose truck is parked in an adjacent lot to the playground. Ryan points to the flowers on the windshield and says that, except for the day of the attack, the bombing victim rarely went into town.

Sarah Rafferty, 12, was recovering from appendicitis and was not downtown during the bombing.

She asks the question on the minds of everyone here.

"Why? Why Omagh?"

The notes scrawled near the scene already have an answer for those who would disrupt the peace process.

"In the name of God, and of the dead generations, we, the real Irish people, demand that you stop the slaughter," reads one signed with the initials "M.C."

"Do not fool yourselves," it continues. "For if you thought the outcome of

this bomb would be a community divided, a town torn apart, think again. We have always stood together, Catholic and Protestant. In grief we stand together now united against you."

For the children, the outpouring of concern offers a small bit of solace in a world they don't understand, Debra O'Donnell says.

"It's nice to see so many people care."

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