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## Sectarian church attack killer leading dissidents

Monday, 23 March 2009

A former republican terrorist who took part in one of the most appalling sectarian atrocities in Northern Ireland is now the leader of the Real IRA, the group which claimed the recent killing of two soldiers in Co Antrim.

The man was one of three gunmen who opened fire with automatic weapons on the congregation of the Darkley Pentecostal Church in south Armagh, killing three worshippers and injuring seven.

The attack took place during the Sunday evening service on November 20, 1983. It caused deep shock because it was the first time that republican gunmen had targeted a Protestant religious service.

The 60-strong congregation was singing the hymn Are You Washed in the Blood of the Lamb when the gunmen burst in and fired more than 40 shots, killing William Brown (59), Victor Cunningham (39), and David Wilson (44). The Pentecostals were known throughout Ulster for their simple, peace-loving lifestyle. The attack was the work of the INLA, an extreme group still in existence.

The gunman, now in his 50s, drifted out of the INLA and was involved in the Provisional IRA before aligning with the Real IRA when it was set up in 1997.

He left after the Omagh bombing in August 1998 but returned some years later, using the terror group name to cover his smuggling and other criminal activities.

He is wealthy and lives in a substantial house in the border area. According to Garda sources, the man has assumed control over Real IRA operations in areas where the group is active in Fermanagh, Armagh, Down and south Londonderry.

The group has been involved in training members from Northern Ireland in sniping and other gun attack tactics in the Cooley mountains in Co Louth. There are also suspicions that there may be a cross-over with the Continuity IRA, which claimed the murder of Constable Stephen Carroll who was killed by a sniper in Craigavon.

In a statement issued last week, the Real IRA's political wing, the 32-County Sovereignty Movement, blamed the government for failing "to pursue the objective of a Sovereign Irish Republic".

Following the posting of the statement on the Indymedia website, there were a number of postings in support of the murders, but also a number condemning them.

The extreme political group, Eirigi, also moved last week to distance itself from the murders in Northern Ireland claiming none of its members was involved.

However, two people who have been describing themselves as "Eirigi activists" for the past year were among those arrested in connection with the killings.

The PSNI has arrested 11 people in connection with the three murders. Under Britain's anti-terrorism legislation introduced in the aftermath of the July 7 bombings in London in 2005, suspects can be held for up to 28 days without charge.

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