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Omagh marks 10 years since terrorist atrocity

ELAINE EDWARDS

Thousands of people attended a ceremony in Omagh this afternoon on the 10th anniversary of the bombing that was the worst single atrocity during the 30 years of the Troubles.

Relatives of victims north and south of the Border, along with the families of Spanish people who died in the atrocity, are attending the event to mark a decade since 29 people, including a woman pregnant with twins, were killed. Hundreds more were injured, many seriously, in the Real IRA bomb that ripped through the town centre on a busy Saturday afternoon in August 1998.

Taoiseach Brian Cowen is attending and the ceremony will be addressed by former Church of England envoy Terry Waite, who was held hostage in Lebanon for five years from 1987 to 1991. Messages of support were also sent by President Mary McAleese and the Spanish prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero.

Also in attendance were the Northern Ireland Secretary Shaun Woodward, Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness and junior minister Jeffrey Donaldson of the DUP.

Mr Cowen said in a statement earlier the Omagh bombing had left an "incredible stain" on our history and was an attack on all the people of Ireland.

The Taoiseach said people all across these islands and further afield would "stand once more in solidarity" with the people of Omagh.

"The atrocity of 15th August 1998 was an attack on all of the people of Ireland. As we continue to build a peaceful and a better future, it remains an indelible stain on our history that will never be forgotten," Mr Cowen said.

"Our thoughts and prayers are with those who were killed and injured, and all of those who still grieve for their loss and who continue to

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In a statement, Mrs McAleese said: "Ten years after the horrific destruction wrought by the Omagh bomb, our thoughts and prayers remain with all those who suffered so cruelly from the evil perpetrated on that dreadful day in August 1998.

"Coming as it did just a few short months after the overwhelming endorsement of the Good Friday agreement, it seemed designed not just wilfully to kill and maim innocent people going about their everyday lives, but also to smother in anger and despair the seeds of a new future that had just been sown in such hope."

Mrs McAleese said that far from "fragmenting along the familiar dividing lines" as they could easily have done, the people of Omagh had "embraced each other as family, as friends, as one suffering community".

"Sadly, Omagh 1998 will always be remembered for the horrific loss of innocent life and the terrible suffering caused to so many. But the way that its people responded to that tragedy will also mark Omagh 1998 as a monument to the triumph of hope over despair and to the reality that a truly new dawn had finally broken in Ireland."

The Government will be represented at a private memorial ceremony in Omagh on Sunday, August 17th.

The plans for the anniversary have been dogged by controversy and today's memorial service is being boycotted by the families of at least 10 of the victims.

Many relatives are unhappy with the way Omagh District Council has handled the contentious issue of the wording on a series of new memorials at the bomb site in Market street and the nearby Garden of Remembrance.

Families belonging to the Omagh Support and Self Help group have organised the alternative commemoration event to take place on Sunday.

Tensions heightened last weekend when it emerged that the leaders of the four main churches in the town had rejected an invite to attend the family organised service.

However, the clergy have since reversed their decision and will now be present at Sunday's event.

Ten years after the bombing, the killers have not been caught and both the Garda and the PSNI have faced heavy criticism for their handling of the investigation.

Labour Party president Michael D Higgins said it was "a matter of great regret" that despite the political progress in Northern Ireland since 1998, "none of those responsible have ever been made to account for their terrible actions".

"A broader inquiry may now be the only way to establish the truth if both the criminal and civil legal processes prove to be ineffective," Mr Higgins said.

Both governments and parliaments would have to commit the resources of their legal systems to arrive at the truth about this cross-border crime and they must do "all within their powers to have such an inquiry put in place, as quickly, economically and effectively as possible".

Additional reporting: PA

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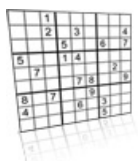
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