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Monday, March 9, 2009

People join in prayer for slain soldiers



Members of the congregation from a local Catholic Church say a prayer near Massereene army base after two British soldiers were shot dead and four other people wounded in an attack by dissident republicans on Saturday, in Co Antrim.
Photograph: Reuters

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DAN KEENAN, Northern News Editor in Massereene, Co Antrim

AT THE SCENE: ANTRIM'S CHURCHES emptied yesterday morning, their congregations headed to the same spot at the PSNI cordon a short distance from the murder scene at the British army barracks.

They prayed for the unidentified British soldiers who had been shot dead, the two others injured in the shootings and for the two young pizza delivery men who had also been targeted.

Fr Tony Devlin of St Comgall's Catholic Church at the town had made contact with clergy from the main Protestant denominations and the response was evident.

Hundreds converged on the point where two police officers stood duty behind the tape which closed off Randalstown Road and the entrance to the scene of the murders.

"We don't want to go back to this," Fr Devlin said. "Nobody wants to go back to this in any way at all. None of us want it in any way at all and we pray that those who are engaged in this will just stop it. Go away from it, we don't want those years of the past, they were horrible years for everyone."

"In our churches today many people were crying because of the experiences they remembered from the past. They do not want it to come back again."

Joined by the local Methodist minister the Rev Jack Moore, Church of Ireland minister the Rev Stephen McBrien and Presbyterian minister the Rev Ian McKee, they led the crowd in a minute's silence.

Among the crowd were local councillors and Assembly members. They recited the Lord's Prayer. Also there was the regimental chaplain from Massereene barracks, Rev Philip McCormack.

As news spread that the 38th Engineering Unit was preparing to deploy to Helmand province in Afghanistan, he explained the effect of the killings on the soldiers who had been stationed at the lightly guarded army base.

"It's a very close-knit unit," he said. "People care a tremendous amount, they spent weeks and months training and preparing and so anything like this will obviously have a profound impact. But they are very professional and we still have a job to do and we will mourn and deal with this and then we will do our job."

Small bunches of flowers were placed as a makeshift tribute. Indeed, the floral tributes increased throughout the day.

"Everyone will hug each other a little tighter tonight after this," Fr Devlin said.

Local people, clearly proud of the levels of normality within their community, reflected quietly on the fact that same calm that pervades their town may have made them a soft target for the killers.

"Antrim has become a very safe and happy place for people to live," Fr Devlin said.

"In many ways it was probably because it was such an easy and safe place for people to travel about, especially the military personnel, it's probably because of that it was such an easy target."

The independent mayor, Oran Keenan, who was accompanied by Ulster Unionist deputy mayor Adrian Watson, said: "Over the past four or five years the churches have all come together and they worship in each other's churches. They are very supportive and there is a very good network."

The killings were an outreach and a "disaster" for the close-knit local community, he said.

"This outrage happened in the second week of Lent which is a very big Christian time. Irishmen are supposed to be Christian and the events that happened here have nothing to do with Christianity or Irishness. Unfortunately there are still people here in our borough who are still hell-bent on the gun rather than seeking political change through the ballot box."

Alliance leader and local Assembly member David Ford stood among those praying for the dead.

"It falls on all of us in political life to overcome petty bickering and to stand together against this threat," he said.

He doubted if anyone with close connections to Antrim had much to do with the incident.

"We have had no sign that there has been any [dissident] activity like this. Unfortunately, I feel we may have been seen as a soft target because of our good community relations and because security levels have been relatively relaxed because people thought that the world had changed."

Soldiers at the barracks had integrated relatively well into the local community, he said. "Clearly it was still an army barracks and still had security at the gate but in terms of the way things operated people would have felt much freer around Antrim than in many other places."

One bystander said simply there was no sense that Antrim was under any form of threat from any group. Politics and trouble were things that happened elsewhere to other people.

"There was no indication of this from anywhere in the town. Thinking back to [PSNI chief constable] Hugh Orde's warning last week [about dissident violence] we now know how much basis he had in truth. We know what truth there really was in them."

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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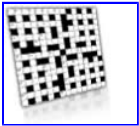
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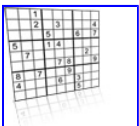
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