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Monday, November 3, 2008

Parade to laud British army passes peacefully

GERRY MORIARTY, Northern Editor

THE BRITISH army homecoming parade and the republican protests in Belfast yesterday passed off without serious incident, although sectarian tensions were ratcheted up in the city.

A huge security operation was mounted by the PSNI to separate the Sinn Féin protest from loyalists who had gathered in their hundreds at the crossroads at Great Victoria Street, Howard Street and Grosvenor Road beside Jury's Inn.

Police were on standby to deal with a second republican protest held by the Éirígí group at Divis Tower. Over 1,000 people took part in the Sinn Féin protest, and some 200 in the Éirígí rally, which remained in the west Belfast area.

Some 20,000 and possibly more turned up for the city centre parade of 250 British army personnel, led by two soldiers accompanying two Irish wolfhounds and an army band. It passed by the flashpoint area just after 11.45am, taking just a few minutes to move onto Howard Street towards the reviewing stand outside City Hall.

Hundreds of loyalists assembled outside Church House, some 25 metres from Grosvenor Road where the Sinn Féin march from west Belfast terminated.

The Sinn Féin parade featured many marchers bearing posters of people killed by the British army. Dozens of black balloons were released. Those present included president Gerry Adams and junior Minister Gerry Kelly, and former senior IRA figures Bobby Storey and Seán "Spike" Murray.

Loyalists taunted republican protesters, the vast majority of whom maintained a silent protest. A number of bottles, stones, cans and fireworks were thrown from the loyalist side. Some of the missiles were thrown by loyalists who climbed scaffolding at Church House, near Jury's Inn.

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Many thousands more kept away from the interface, gathering closer to City Hall for the homecoming parade, including DUP First Minister Peter Robinson and junior minister Jeffrey Donaldson.

The Parades Commission had granted permission for the protest to take place at Donegall Place, opposite City Hall. This had the potential to be more dangerous, as the bulk of the crowd had assembled there. Sinn Féin agreed to reroute its parade further away from the city centre after the British army chief in Northern Ireland Maj Gen Chris Brown cancelled a planned RAF flypast.

Mr Kelly said the Sinn Féin protest was dignified and in "marked contrast to the sectarian and violent reaction of those who claimed to be on the streets to welcome home the British army".

DUP MLA Jeffrey Donaldson accused the protesters of seeking confrontation.

West Belfast SDLP MLA Alex Attwood said the parade and protest had brought Belfast close to "tipping point" over the past week, and was a clear demonstration of the "catastrophic failure" of leadership from Sinn Féin and the DUP.

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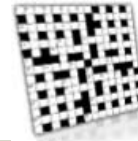


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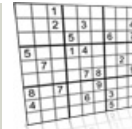
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