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Monday, March 9, 2009

No return to North's dark days

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THE MURDER of two British soldiers by dissident republicans on Saturday represents as much a danger to the quality of life on this island as the threatened collapse of the global economy. Make no mistake about it, any resumption of violence in Northern Ireland will cause inestimable damage to the peace process, prevent foreign investment and contribute to rising unemployment and falling living standards. Having come so far, there should be no return to the dark days of the past.

The two communities in the North and their political leaders must respond in a creative and determined fashion to this atrocity. Two young soldiers have just lost their lives and four other people – two of them civilians – have been wounded in a carefully planned and ruthless gun attack at Massereene Barracks in Antrim. It followed a series of unsuccessful murder attempts against members of the Police Service of Northern Ireland over the past year. Dissident republicans were provided with vital oxygen as political infighting between Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party prevented the Executive functioning for five long months. Lessons must be learned from that episode.

Last week, nationalist politicians expressed concern because Sir Hugh Orde called in half-a-dozen British army specialists in response to the growing threat from dissident republicans. Now that his decision has been vindicated, they are unlikely to admit their errors. They should, however, act on last year's warning by former police ombudsman Nuala O'Loan that complacency is the enemy of peace and if politicians and community activists do not work together, the peace process could begin to unravel. These are dangerous times. Public confidence in a better future will have been dented by the economic downturn, while unemployment and lack of opportunity may provide fertile recruiting circumstances for paramilitary elements on both sides.

The Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) has warned of such a prospect. Dissident republicans have become more active in their efforts to recruit members and to import weapons. Former members of the Provisional IRA have also joined in their smuggling and diesel-laundering activities along the Border. At the same time, loyalist paramilitaries have continued to engage in drug dealing, extortion and robbery. For so long as ordinary citizens turn a blind eye to such criminal actions, the threat of a resumption of full-scale violence remains.

The transfer of justice and policing powers to the North has become a source of serious dissent between Sinn Féin and the DUP. But such a development should, as the IMC suggested, be regarded as a welcome opportunity by the Assembly and the Executive to bring about the integration of law enforcement and other public services. Actively working towards accommodation would isolate the extremist fringe in both communities and solidify the peace process. The cost of political failure has been revealed in all its bloody and painful detail by the weekend shootings. We do not want to return there.

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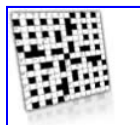
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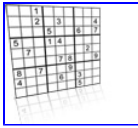
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