News

Joe Biden speaks into microphones in front of a mural that says "Belfast"

U.S. President Joe Biden speaks at Ulster University in Belfast, Northern Ireland, April 12, 2023, marking the 25th anniversary commemorations of the "Good Friday Agreement." (OSV News photo/Kevin Lamarque, Reuters)



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President Joe Biden said "the enemies of peace will not prevail" in Northern Ireland as he pledged the United States would continue to partner and support the region in building stability and future prosperity for its young people.

In his keynote address in Belfast on April 12, marking the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, Biden said the lesson of the groundbreaking accord was that "when things seem fragile, or easily broken, that is when hope and hard work are needed the most."

"That's why we must make our theme: repair, repair. In the holy Easter season -- this season when all Christians celebrate renewal and life -- the Good Friday Agreement shows us that there is hope for repair, even in the most awful breakages," said Biden.

The April 1998 accord forged peace in Northern Ireland after decades of violence that claimed the lives of over 3,600 people. As well as saving potentially hundreds of lives, the agreement, which was brokered by U.S. Sen. George Mitchell, also established a devolved power-sharing government for Northern Ireland's deeply divided people, fissured between Protestant-Unionists-Loyalists and Catholic-Nationalists-Republicans.

The U.S. president spoke ahead of officially opening the $437 million Ulster University campus in Belfast, the only public engagement of his short stop in Northern Ireland.

Political leaders and representatives from youth, business and civic communities listened as Biden noted how over the past decade the region has attracted $2 billion of U.S. investment. There are currently 200 U.S. companies employing up to 30,000 people in Northern Ireland, which has a population of 1.9 million people.

Biden expressed his hope that the power-sharing Assembly and Executive, or Stormont, which the Good Friday Agreement brought into being and which are currently suspended after the Democratic Unionist Party walked out over a year ago, would soon be restored.

"For in politics, no matter what divides us, if we look hard enough, there are always areas that can bring us together if we look hard enough. Standing for peace, rejecting political violence, must be one of those things," Biden said.

The political impasse stems from the refusal of the unionist Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to sit in government in protest over the Protocol deal negotiated between the United Kingdom and the European Union in the wake of Brexit. The DUP contends that the Protocol inserted customs and regulatory borders between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, undermining their place in the United Kingdom.

A new agreement, the Windsor Framework, was thrashed out between the U.K. and the EU in February, aimed at easing some of the DUP's concerns over the movement of goods between Britain and Northern Ireland. However, the DUP has so far refused

to back it and continues to boycott the devolved power-sharing government.

The political vacuum has seen heightened tensions, with the attempted killing by dissident republicans of Detective Chief Inspector John Caldwell in February, which was noted by Biden in his speech. On Easter weekend, small-scale rioting by republican youth broke out in Derry, or officially, Londonderry.

Biden's visit is the first to Northern Ireland by a U.S. president in 10 years. In his speech he emphasized that Northern Ireland can be transformed as a result of the peace dividend and by fostering democratic institutions.

Referring to the "immense progress" seen in Northern Ireland since 1998, he said it attested to the power of democracy to deliver for all the people. "We in the United States have first-hand experience of how fragile even long-standing democratic institutions can be. You saw what happened on Jan. 6 in my country," Biden said. "We learn anew in every generation that democracy needs champions."

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Biden's observation on the vital importance of the democratic institutions established in the Good Friday Agreement and the necessity for them to be restored was welcomed by Fr. Patrick McCafferty, parish priest of Corpus Christi in Ballymurphy, West Belfast.

The parish was the scene of a massacre in August 1971 when the British Army killed 10 innocent civilians, including Fr. Hugh Mullan, who was going to the aid of a wounded man.

McCafferty noted Biden's recollection of his visit to Belfast in 1991, when the city was "sliced up" by barbed wire. Today, instead of barbed wire, "we find a cathedral of learning built of glass that lets the light shine in and out," the president said of the new university campus.

"We all remember so well those terrible days of barbed wire, broken glass, and lost lives. The president's welcome visit and helpful words highlights hope. Our resilient community, which suffered so much, never lost or abandoned hope. We hoped against hope when all seemed quite hopeless," McCafferty told OSV News.

He added, "All through the years of violence, our Christian churches kept hope alive and, in the vast majority of cases, Catholics and Protestants, in their respective houses of worship, heard the Gospel of love faithfully proclaimed."

Prior to his address in Belfast, Biden met British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak and the two leaders discussed the war in Ukraine.

On April 12 in the afternoon, the president and his entourage, which includes his sister, Valerie Biden Owens, and his son, Hunter Biden, crossed the border into the Republic of Ireland for three days of engagements in County Louth, Dublin, and County Mayo.

His visit to County Louth on April 12 and to County Mayo on April 14 are part of a personal pilgrimage to his ancestral homeland. Ten of Biden's 16 great-great-grandparents come from the Emerald Isle, including Finnegans and Kearneys from County Louth and Blewitts from County Mayo.

On April 13, Biden meets Irish President Michael D. Higgins and Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, Ireland's prime minister. He addresses a joint sitting of Ireland's houses of parliament, Dáil and Seanad Éireann, at Leinster House in the afternoon, becoming the fourth U.S. president to do so after John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton. A state reception will be held in Dublin Castle that evening.

On April 14, the president, who is Catholic, visits the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Knock in County Mayo, Ireland's national Marian Shrine, where an apparition of Our Lady, St. Joseph, the Lamb of God and St. John occurred in 1879.

Afterward, he is expected to visit the remnants of the home of his great-great-grandfather, Edward Blewitt, in Ballina, County Mayo. The town of Ballina was devastated during the Great Famine (1845-52), known in Ireland as "an Gorta Mór" or "the Great Hunger" when a million Irish died of starvation and another million fled the island as refugees, with most of them ending up in the U.S.

Edward Blewitt (1795-1872), an ordnance surveyor, sold bricks for the construction of St. Muredach's Cathedral in Ballina, before the family emigrated to the U.S.

On April 14, in the afternoon, Biden completes his visit to Ireland with a public address at St. Muredach's.