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Irish Catholic leaders say country must remain vigilant about violence

by Michael Kelly by Catholic News Service

Dublin — The Irish cannot afford to be complacent about violence, even though they have lived with a peace agreement for 15 years, said Ireland's most senior Catholic leader.

"Just as they can contribute to the sources of conflict, issues of social and economic justice constitute an integral element of the work of peace," said Cardinal Sean Brady of Armagh, Northern Ireland, president of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference.

"There is a real danger at the present time that this crucial fact might be overlooked in the understandable urgency with which governments are striving to achieve economic recovery," he said. "Economic and social injustice provides a fertile breeding ground for conflict and violence, as the anger of those who feel marginalized or excluded can be manipulated and exploited."

Political, religious and community leaders marked the 15th anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement April 10, 1998. The agreement, between the British and Irish governments and political representatives of the region's Catholic and Protestant communities, brought to an end 30 years of sectarian violence and committed all sides to exclusively peaceful political activism.

The agreement established a cross-community power-sharing government based in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Irish nationalists, most of whom are Catholic, want Northern Ireland to become part of the Republic of Ireland and form a single united Ireland. Unionists, most of whom are Protestant, want the region to remain part of Britain. The agreement provides for an eventual referendum process to establish the wishes of all the people about the constitutional future of Northern Ireland.

"The defining feature of the Good Friday Agreement was the achievement of bringing groups who were

bitterly opposed to one another around the same table. This was what made the Irish peace process an example for the whole world," Brady said.

Some 3,720 people died during the Northern Ireland conflict -- often called "the Troubles" -- from 1968 to 1998. Tensions soared in the late 1960s after Catholic civil rights campaigners began demanding equal rights from the Protestant-dominated government in Belfast.

Baroness Nuala O'Loan, a Catholic member of Britain's House of Lords and the woman responsible for overseeing reforms of the Northern Ireland police force to make it more representative of both communities, said sectarianism remains a key problem.

"We have not been able to build a shared future. There are now at least 59 so-called 'peace walls' in Northern Ireland, nine more than there were in 1998," she said, referring to walls built along flash points where Protestant and Catholic communities live in close proximity to keep both sides apart and avoid tension leading to violence.

"There is no doubt that sectarianism costs hundreds of thousands of pounds a year in segregated housing, health, welfare and recreational facilities," the baroness said.

She said she believes that a reconciliation process must be established to deal with past hurts.

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"It has been recognized in peace processes across the world that failure to deal with the past leaves a legacy which has the potential to prevent the consolidation of peace," she told Catholic News Service. "We need a process for investigating the unresolved deaths from our troubled past."

Retired Bishop Edward Daly of Derry, Northern Ireland, recalls how, in 1979, Blessed John Paul II hoped to visit Northern Ireland in addition to the Irish Republic, but an upsurge in violence made this impossible.

Daly recalled the pope's appeal: "On my knees I beg you to turn away from the paths of violence and to return to the ways of peace," the pontiff urged paramilitaries.

"It was such a powerful address," Daly recalled. "It was a well-received message, and there were great hopes immediately after it and praise for the pope in meeting with the issue of violence head-on."

He added that the warmth of reception for the pope's message at that time did not include those engaged in violence.

"I was dismayed that there was no considered response to John Paul's message," he said. "There was just the usual knee-jerk reaction. His speech was worthy of more than that. There should at least have been an internal discussion."

Daly was involved in efforts to convince paramilitaries to embrace peace.

"I visited prisons for 20 years, reasoning with people who were angry. It was hard to get through to them, to make them listen when, for them, revenge is the only thought. When a conflict is in full flight, it is hard to rationally discuss the idea of peace and a peaceful resolution."

Paramilitary prisoners eventually proved to be key in ensuring cease-fires in 1994, events that paved the

way for the peace accord four years later.

"The challenge for us all now, 15 years on, is to face our divided, troubled past with courage, and to take every opportunity which presents in our individual lives, whether through prayer, community work, politics, economic development or social activity, to work for the common good, to bring an end to the politics of division, and to create a shared society," O'Loan said.

Brady said despite the challenges that remain, people should be hopeful.

"What was achieved in 1998 would have been considered unthinkable only a few years earlier," he said.

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