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## Fallout from Omagh atrocity has lasting effect on North's policing

DAN KEENAN Northern News Editor

The 10th anniversary of the Omagh bombing will be a difficult day for many people

ON THE face of it, Friday's anniversary gathering of citizens, elected representatives, public officials and the bereaved to commemorate the worst single atrocity of the Troubles will be a solemn and unifying event.

But August 15th, 2008, will be a difficult day for many more than the families of the people who were murdered and the hundreds more injured on that date 10 years earlier.

Omagh now means much more than the Real IRA bombing of a town with such horrific loss of life and limb.

The intervening years bear witness to the failure of state organisations to bring those responsible to justice, to the strains faced by the governments and judiciaries North and South.

The years are punctuated by damaging public clashes between senior police officers and those who oversee them - clashes which have punctuated the establishment of a new policing dispensation in Northern Ireland.

They have seen divisions emerge among the relatives of those killed.

Some will attend Friday's commemoration. Others will mark the date privately, away from any collective act of memory.

Others still will gather on Sunday, as they have done on recent anniversaries, to remember their dead and injured. They feel hurt by the decisions of public representatives to hold an "official" act of remembrance at a refashioned "peace garden" in the town.

The decision by local priests and ministers to attend the "official" but not the "unofficial" gathering adds to the sense of division, with evidence of a painful split between clerical and congregation.

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Government ministers and officials from Spain, Stormont, London and Dublin - the Taoiseach among them - will gather in Co Tyrone, well aware that Omagh stands as all-too-clear proof that making peace is indeed a difficult, protracted and messy business.

The Real IRA says it bombed Omagh to destabilise the Belfast Agreement which had been signed just four months earlier, on Good Friday.

In that cold analysis, it was almost successful.

David Trimble, already under significant pressure from accusing unionists shouting "sellout", found himself under even more pressure. Unionists had voted for the Belfast accord by a bare majority. The Omagh bombing made the Ulster Unionist leader's position much more difficult in that he denounced one group of republicans while preparing to share executive power with Sinn Féin.

Anti-agreement unionists made the simple argument that there was little point to the new political structures at Stormont if the mayhem and killing continued.

Police forces North and South also suffered fallout from Omagh.

Newly-installed police ombudsman Nuala O'Loan issued a withering analysis of the RUC investigation which questioned the leadership of then chief constable Ronnie Flanagan.

He replied with a threat of legal action, some sharp words of his own about Mrs O'Loan and a threat to kill himself in public if her criticisms were held to be true. This was later retracted.

In the Republic, the Court of Criminal Appeal held that Garda notes in relation to the conviction of Colm Murphy, the only man jailed over the bombing, had been falsified. A retrial was ordered.

In Belfast, the trial judge in the case against Sean Hoey denounced some of the police evidence before freeing the man who had been charged with the 29 murders. That led to chief constable Sir Hugh Orde's admission that a conviction for Omagh is improbable without fresh evidence.

The bombing also led to the first denunciation of republican violence by a Sinn Féin member - tricky ground for a party aiming to steer its supporters towards politics while not condemning the IRA's campaign.

Omagh remains utterly unresolved on many levels. The organisation which carried out the attack called a ceasefire only to reverse that decision. It remains active.

The police investigation on both sides of the Border continues, operating under a plethora of oversight and quality-checking procedures, in the knowledge that earlier failures, particularly in relation to the handling of evidence, have diminished the chances of a conviction.

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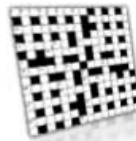
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