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Saturday, August 16, 2008

Leaden clouds release a deluge on sombre scene of aching grief

THE MOOD: Red flower petals flowing down the street in rivulets of rain held a particular symbolism, writes **Dan Keenan**

DOES OMAGH ever get a break? The worst single atrocity of the Troubles, last winter's tragic fire in which seven members of one family died - and now this.

Yesterday's meticulously managed 10th anniversary commemoration was preceded by not so much a downpour as a deluge.

It seemed that the stricken town's efforts to remember the dead would be a battle against a cruel summer.

Then, just before 3pm and the scheduled start of the solemn commemoration, it appeared that divine intervention had at last been seen in Omagh.

The steady rain suddenly stopped and, as if right on cue, out stepped the soberly suited Taoiseach Brian Cowen, the Northern Secretary Shaun Woodward; Martin McGuinness and Jeffrey Donaldson representing the Stormont Executive, senior members from the Spanish mission in London including Javier Carbajosa, acting ambassador and charge d'affaires.

They took their places amid a crowd, measured in hundreds rather than in thousands, many of them still dripping and standing around in puddles.

The atmosphere was one of recent rather than distant tragedy, of attendance born out of a sense of duty rather than of a collective will to show how far things have moved on in a decade.

The band played, the cross-Border choir sang, the Bible was read, poet John Hewitt's appropriate words on Ulster's dead were quoted in English, Irish and Spanish.

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Every word, every note, every action oozed symbolism. The pathos was tangible.

The rain returned, at first sporadically, then steadily and the crowd raised their brollies transforming their huddles into little tented villages.

At 3.10pm, the moment the bomb had exploded, silence fell. Only the hum of television satellite vans broke the perfect still.

With heads bowed and with their collective gaze on the wet road, they mourned.

Only the darting eyes of the occasional undercover security men glancing around the forest of umbrellas and the distant throb of a helicopter gave any clue of an enduring sense of threat.

A complex system of mirrors designed to reflect the sun's light from the memorial garden to the scene of the original horror was formally put into use.

But there was no sunlight to reflect, and the mood like the afternoon remained sombre.

The glass memorial on the site of the explosion was unveiled and some children, dressed more for summer than a soaking, spread red petals on the road where so much blood had been spilt a decade ago.

Mixed with the rain however, red dye ran easily from the petals forming rivulets down the narrow street where the attack had taken place.

For some onlookers the street running red once again was an example too many of accidental symbolism.

Omagh, indeed, never does seem to get a break.

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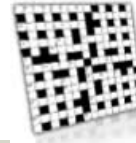


This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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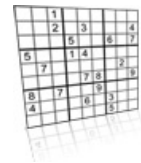
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