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Thursday, March 12, 2009

Thousands stand up against return of terror



A peace gathering in Derry. Photographs: Niall Carson/ PA, Trevor McBride

- [« Prev](#) 1/3 [Next »](#)

In this section »

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- [Checks stepped up along Border](#)
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- [Leaders hail cross-party 'unity' as rallies held](#)
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GERRY MORIARTY and FIONA GARTLAND

SILENT VIGILS: THOUSANDS OF people stood silently at lunchtime vigils in Belfast, Derry, Newry, Downpatrick and Lisburn yesterday to remember the murdered British soldiers Mark Quinsey and Patrick Azimkar and police officer Stephen Carroll.

They sombre crowds gathered beside brightly coloured trade union banners to make a point for peace.

The biggest turnout was in Belfast, where 5,000 people gathered along the entire front of City Hall, with the crowd stretching down into Donegall Place.

One woman, Katie, from Tandragee in Co Antrim, not far from Craigavon, explained that Constable Stephen Carroll was a friend of her family. A couple of months ago Constable Carroll booked her boyfriend for speeding, she said.

The 26-year-old architect said she was 15 when the first IRA and loyalist ceasefires were called.

"It is horrific to think that it has all come back again at a time when we did really forget," she said. "We are here to support the peace and to take a stand."

Her friend, Eva McDermott, also an architect, is from Dublin living in Belfast for the past 10 years and loving the city.

"This is the first time I have come face to face with anything like this and it is just horrendous. You can see by the numbers who are here today that the people who are committing these murders are not speaking for anybody but themselves," she said.

Said Alison (26), from Co Down: "It is an awful thing to lose a family member for something that just seems so futile carried out by people who have no support. It is horrific. I would like to show support for the families, to let them know that we are thinking about them at this horrible time."

Maeve Donnelly, a special needs teacher, travelled from Larne to the Belfast rally with her husband Danny, a nurse, and their two-year-old boy, Oliver. "We remember what it was like and we really, really don't want to go back to that. It's just too scary to contemplate," she said. "It was good to see so many people. It is a very clear signal that there is no support in any quarter for the people who did this. Nobody wants a return to those days."

In Craigavon, up to 500 people attended a prayer service just yards from where Constable Carroll was killed. The sombre crowd of men, women and children gathered in a circle beneath bare trees. Some held candles while others held hands.

Craigavon parish priest Fr Martin McLinden asked all those present to pray for Mr Carroll's family and for peace. He asked for prayers that no one would give in to the temptation of violence.

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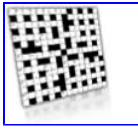
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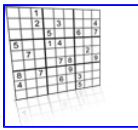
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