

Northern Ireland peace one step closer

by Mary Jane Freeman

With the announcement of a cease-fire on Oct. 13 by the Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC) representing the militant Protestants of Northern Ireland, the possibility for peace in that region is one step closer. A combination of initiatives over the last months from various quarters in the United States, the Republic of Ireland, and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) have created a geometry in which, for the first time in 70 years, the British government must sit down at the peace table, or, if they delay, be exposed for their role in the last 25 years of terror.

From Belfast, Gusty Spence, spokesman for the CLMC, which is comprised of the Ulster Freedom Fighters and the Ulster Volunteer Force, declared that as of midnight on Oct. 13, a "universal cease-fire" would go into effect. Three days earlier, Loyalists leaders had met jailed Protestant guerrillas in the maximum security Maze prison near Belfast to get their agreement to a possible cease-fire. The Protestants' announcement followed the IRA cease-fire declared on Aug. 31, which went into effect on Sept. 1. Spence made clear that the CLMC announcement is in response to and dependent on the unbroken cease-fire of the IRA. "The permanence of our cease-fire will be completely dependent upon the continuing cessation of all nationalist/republican violence. The sole responsibility for a return to war lies with them [IRA]," he said.

This condition echoes British Prime Minister John Major's hesitancy to accept the IRA cease-fire on its face. Major's continuing excuse for balking at meeting with the IRA's political party, the Sinn Fein, and its president, Gerry Adams, has been that the IRA cease-fire did not include the word "permanent."

Within hours of the CLMC announcement, President Clinton welcomed the move. "I welcome today's announcement by the CLMC in Northern Ireland declaring an end to its campaign of violence. The cease-fire announcement by the IRA on Aug. 31 and today's announcement by Loyalist paramilitaries present the best hope for peace in a generation in Northern Ireland," he said. Likewise, Ireland's Prime Minister Albert Reynolds lauded the move, saying, "It is my hope and my conviction that there will never be political violence on our island again."

Much credit is due to President Clinton for his efforts to shepherd the Northern Ireland peace process. Back in

December 1993, Major and Reynolds released a joint document called the "Downing Street Declaration," intended as an outline for launching peace efforts in Northern Ireland. But within weeks, a stalemate occurred when Major refused to provide clarification on a point dealing with constitutional reforms to the Sinn Fein. Twice this year, however, Clinton overrode British and U.S. State Department opposition to Adams's entry into the United States, thus creating the circumstances for him to garner American support for the peace process.

Both Clinton and Reynolds challenged Britain to now move the peace process forward. Clinton said that "the parties must now build on this historic step forward and enter into negotiations for a lasting settlement. . . . I look forward to the next steps . . . including the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation proposed by Prime Minister Reynolds and the round-table talks convened by the Irish and British governments with all involved parties." Reuters reported, "Reynolds urged Britain to seize an opportunity to end the guerrilla war conclusively and bring the political mentors of both the Protestant extremists and their Catholic republican enemies into peace negotiations." Sinn Fein President Adams, who just completed a two-week tour of the United States in support of a "lasting peace in Ireland," declared this a "very significant step forward." "I would call upon John Major who has fumbled this peace process for far too long . . . to commence peace talks," he said.

Major's reaction was to herald the Protestant cease-fire as "extremely good news" but to continue his set-piece approach to activating the peace discussions. He said his government will study the implications of this new development "in our own time and in our own way. Another very important part of the jigsaw has fallen into place."

The hope for peace in Northern Ireland is exhibited in the CLMC's statement released at the Belfast press conference. "We are on the threshold of a new and exciting beginning with our battles in the future being political battles, fought on the side of honesty, decency, and democracy . . . against the negativity of mistrust, misunderstanding, and malevolence, so that together we can bring forth a wholesome society in which our children and their children will know the meaning of true peace," it read.

Economic development is key

For this potential future to be realized, however, a coherent economic plan to both integrate the economies of the north and south of Ireland, and also with the whole of Europe, is crucial. The Clinton administration is expected, within days, to release the results of a study by an interdepartmental committee coordinated by the National Security Council on U.S. investment opportunities. Parallel to this effort is the "Delors Plan" of the European Union, which includes significant proposals for all of Ireland. This must be the agenda at the late October summit between Reynolds and Major.