Killings must not revive hostilities in Northern Ireland

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

One of the most successful peace-making efforts in modern history is at a crossroads.

Dissident republicans have killed two British soldiers and a police officer in Northern Ireland in recent days, hoping to destabilize the power-sharing provincial government in Belfast. No soldiers had been killed in Northern Ireland since 1997, and the last murder of a policeman occurred in 1998, the year the Good Friday peace accord was signed by Protestant and Roman Catholic political leaders.

That agreement, brokered by former Sen. George Mitchell, seemingly marked the end of the "Troubles," as the Irish call the centuries-old strife between Catholic republicans and the English government and its Protestant supporters. It led, in 2005, to the Irish Republican Army's decision to disarm. Two years later, the first joint Catholic-Protestant government was formed.

Two splinter republican groups that objected to the IRA's renunciation of violence have taken credit for the recent killings.

One great success of the peace accord has been the demilitarization of Northern Ireland. British troops, who regularly patrolled the streets during the three decades of the modern "Troubles," have had their numbers drawn down to about 1,500 from a peak of nearly 25,000. Their presence was a great provocation to Irish nationalists. The soldiers who remain stay within their garrisons and spend their time training for deployment. The two men who were killed were due to depart for Afghanistan.

The extremists hope to provoke an overreaction that would send soldiers back on the streets and spark a new round of republican outrage. But the long-elusive peace in Northern Ireland might not be so fragile.

Thousands of residents of the tiny province took to the streets in a peace rally last week. Protestant and Catholic clergy coordinated special services for peace on Sunday. And Northern Ireland's first minister, Peter Robinson, and its deputy leader, Martin McGuinness, a former IRA commander, have stood together in calling for the capture of the gunmen and for sectarian restraint. McGuinness went so far as to call the republican dissidents "traitors to the island of Ireland."

Robinson and McGuinness, along with Ireland's prime minister, Robert Gibbs, met Tuesday with President Barack Obama at a White House commemoration of Ireland's patron saint. The president took the opportunity to offer the visiting leaders, along with the war-weary people of Northern Ireland, America's full support in suppressing violence and maintaining a remarkable, if threatened, peace.

Reprinted From The San Diego Union-Tribune. Distributed By Creators Syndicate Inc.

Killings must not revive hostilities in Northern Ireland by The San Diego Union-Tribune