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PEACE?



Talks draw mixed views

Ever since the Provisional Irish Republican Army declared a cease-fire in September 1994, a bird rarely seen above Northern Ireland has been flying about seeking a place to alight.

Yet to be determined, however, is whether its nest will be beneath a Union Jack or an Irish tricolor flag.

In the next several weeks, negotiations between mainly Protestant pro-British unionists who want Northern Ireland to remain a British province, and mainly Catholic Irish nationalists who seek total unity with the rest of Ireland may produce a settlement. (See sidebar.)

What has kept hope alive in Northern Ireland is that the current negotiations involve three of the region's four largest political parties — the pro-British Ulster Unionist Party, and the two largest mainly Catholic nationalist parties, the Social Democratic and Labour Party and Sinn Fein, which is aligned with the Provisional Irish Republican Army.

Then again, the negotiations could fail, given that the second largest unionist party, the Rev. Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party, isn't even participating.

Dublin native Patrick J. White, a parishioner at Our Mother of Sorrows Church in Greece, is pessimistic that the current peace process will lead anywhere. Up until a few years ago, White was active in a local chapter of Northern Irish Aid, a U.S. group that supports the families of Irish republican prisoners.

White said three years ago, he thought there was hope for peace in Northern Ireland, and he expressed admiration for British Prime Minister Tony Blair's efforts on behalf of that peace. But recent events — including the killings of Catholics by loyalist paramilitaries — have made him pessimistic, he said.

"I don't think anybody's going to give up anything," he said. "Right now, I think these talks are going to a dead end."

A fresh start

On March 23, negotiations that began last fall between several political parties in Northern Ireland, along with the British and Irish governments, are set to resume. Representatives of Sinn Fein are likely to be there, although they were suspended Feb. 20 for two weeks from the peace talks.

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