Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Resolution 1389 (2004)[1]

The Council of Europe and the conflict in Northern Ireland

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly refers to its Resolution 1163 (1998) on the agreement on Northern Ireland. This agreement, known as the Belfast Agreement or the Good Friday Agreement, concluded by the governments of the United Kingdom and Ireland on 10 April 1998 following multi-party negotiations, raised great hopes, both in the two countries concerned and at international level, that a fair and lasting settlement of the conflict in Northern Ireland might be reached.

2. The representative institutions, co-operation agreements and the legislative reforms put in place by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement provided an appropriate institutional framework for pursuing the peace process in Northern Ireland, promoting co-operation between the North and the South of Ireland and between the United Kingdom and Ireland, and strengthening the protection of human rights.

3. However, many difficulties have been experienced in implementing the agreement and it has not produced all the desired results. The main democratic institutions in Northern Ireland – the assembly and the executive – have been suspended since October 2002 and the province is under the direct administration of the British Government. As a result, the peace process has reached a difficult stage and risks losing the wide public support it previously enjoyed.

4. The situation in Northern Ireland has clearly improved since the time of the negotiation of the Belfast/ Good Friday Agreement. The period of violent conflict is at an end and, although terrorist attacks and paramilitary activities have not completely ceased, they have considerably decreased and a return to widespread violence seems unlikely.

5. Nevertheless, this progress contrasts with the difficult and sensitive situation which persists on the political scene. The problem of disarming paramilitary groups has not yet been resolved. Furthermore, society in Northern Ireland remains deeply divided along community borders. Mutual distrust and fear persist. The end of the conflict has not yet turned into true peace.

6. Perpetuating the current situation and allowing hopes for peace to be dashed would be unforgivable. It is of paramount importance, not only for the future of the people of Northern Ireland but for the whole of Europe, that fresh impetus be given to the peace process set in motion by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

7. The Council of Europe and its Assembly, in consultation with the British and Irish authorities, have a moral obligation to do everything in their power to help advance the peace process in Northern Ireland.

8. The Assembly therefore resolves to:

8.1. determine, in close co-operation with the British and Irish authorities and all the parties concerned, the reasons why the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement has not produced the desired results;

8.2. consider, also in consultation with the British and Irish authorities, what contribution it can make:

a. to the resumption of political dialogue between the Northern Ireland political parties to help give fresh impetus to the peace process within the framework of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement;

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1. Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 7 September 2004 (see Doc. 10245, report of the Political Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Mr Ouzký).

b. to promoting respect for human rights in the society of Northern Ireland and to strengthening the relevant institutions;

c. to promoting education aimed at reconciliation, respect for differences and a shared future;

8.3. consider how both the positive and the negative lessons learned from the implementation of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement might be used to help settle other conflicts in Europe.

9. The Assembly also calls on:

9.1. the political forces in Northern Ireland to:

a. honour all the commitments entered into during the negotiations which led to the conclusion of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement;

b. engage in a political dialogue which would achieve a breakthrough in the implementation of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and revive the peace process in Northern Ireland;

9.2. the British Government to:

a. make the democratic institutions of Northern Ireland fully operational again, as soon as conditions allow;

b. make full use of Council of Europe expertise and experience to strengthen the machinery for human rights protection and rebuild trust between the communities in Northern Ireland;

9.3. the British and Irish governments to make full use of the Council of Europe's machinery and instruments, in particular those concerning cross-border co-operation and the protection of minorities, to foster exchanges between both parts of the island of Ireland.

10. Finally, the Assembly invites the Secretary General of the Council of Europe to:

10.1. continue to offer the British and Irish authorities the benefit of the Council of Europe's experience and expertise as regards implementation of the provisions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement relating to human rights protection and the reform of the police and justice in Northern Ireland;

10.2. consider how the Council of Europe's activity programmes, in particular in the fields of culture and education, might help to rebuild trust between the communities of Northern Ireland.