

Children Treat Themselves To First Halloween Without Fear

BELFAST, Northern Ireland (AP) — The devil and the skeleton boy leaned against the City Cemetery wall, shared an illicit cigarette and waited for the barrage to begin.

Rockets soon lit up the night sky over Catholic west Belfast, casting the pro-IRA wall murals and nearby British army fortress in red, white and purple — and families stood on their front porches cheering.

"Thems're peace bombs. Better'n the real thing," said 10-year-old Seamus, in skeleton costume, to his satanic classmate, Damien.

For Seamus and thousands of children in Northern Ireland, this is their first Halloween without real fear following cease-fires by the Irish Republican Army and Protestant paramilitaries.

The separate truces, beginning with the IRA's on Sept. 1, brought peace to this British province for the first time since Protestant-Catholic rioting erupted in 1969.

Halloween festivities started over the weekend. For once, parents did not have to worry that their trick-or-treating children would get caught in gunfire or a bomb attack.

"Everyone's enjoying this Halloween more with the peace on, naturally," said Alwyn McKee, 35, a Protestant youth worker in west Belfast's Shankill Road.

Like the Catholic Falls Road, the Protestant Shankill is celebrating with street parties, discos, drinks and loud fireworks, as it did during most of "the troubles." Children dress up and go door to door, asking for small change rather than candy, along the streets in the immediate vicinity.

At Queen's University in prosperous south Belfast, the Halloween revelry has reached fever pitch this year — crowded parties with Anglo-

American pop and traditional Irish folk music.

On Saturday night, three students arrived at the student union bar dressed as terrorists in camouflage combat jackets and balaclavas. One had a stuffed white bird strapped to the barrel of his plastic Armalite rifle.

Calling themselves "Gerry and the Peacemakers," in reference to Gerry Adams, leader of the IRA-supporting Sinn Fein party, they went about telling fellow students: "Give peace a chance — or we'll do your knees."

The joke wore well with some, but sent shivers of bad taste through others remembering last year, when Halloween celebrations at Queen's were canceled as Northern Ireland endured one of its worst periods of murders.

Pro-British "loyalist" paramilitary groups, based in Protestant areas, murdered several Catholics in September and October 1993. The IRA tried to attack loyalist offices on the Shankill Road and instead blew up nine Protestant civilians.

Then two Protestant gunmen showed up at a Halloween eve party at the isolated Rising Sun Bar 70 miles west of Belfast, and shouted "trick or treat" at the door.

A young woman at the nearest table told them, "That's not funny," and they shot her fatally through the chest. Seven people died that night — six Catholics, one Protestant.

On Sunday, Protestants and Catholics prayed together outside the bar and unveiled a memorial plaque. The Rev. Stephen Kearney, the local Catholic priest, said people were praying for the men who pulled the trigger that night.

"This Halloween is a time of terrible memories," Kearney said. "But it is also a time when we are demonstrating our common Christianity and building a new era of hope."

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