

Anti-Catholic marches, protests continue in Northern Ireland

BELFAST, Northern Ireland (AP) — Police commanders and politicians appealed Wednesday for Protestant hard-liners to call off street protests that have caused rioting, fear and destruction across Northern Ireland.

At daybreak, Belfast commuters picked their way carefully down roads strewn with shattered glass, rubble and occasional burned-out vehicles, the product of a third consecutive night of unrest in hard-line Protestant neighborhoods. In the most serious incident, unidentified gunmen exchanged fire with police in north Belfast but nobody was reported injured.

The mounting attacks on police and Catholic properties are designed to force British authorities to reverse their decision to bar a traditional Protestant parade from a Catholic neighborhood this Sunday. The now-annual dispute first triggered widespread violence in 1996, when police eventually reversed a decision to block the same parade by the Orange Order.

Many Catholics despise Orange parades, which often feature drum-thumping "kick the pope" bands and commemorate 300-year-old Protestant victories over Catholics. More than 2,000 such parades are staged each summer, only a few dozen of which go through predominantly Catholic areas.

This time Northern Ireland's police force, the

Royal Ulster Constabulary, has responded firmly when challenged, particularly in farm fields near Portadown, 30 miles southwest of Belfast.

There, security forces for the past three nights have prevented Protestant mobs from reaching the nearby Garvaghy Road, where most of Portadown's Catholic minority lives.

On Wednesday morning, British army engineers erected a 20-foot-high steel barricade backed by concrete across the Orangemen's intended path.

Late Tuesday, police came under attack from a 500-strong Protestant mob. Attackers hurled firecrackers and rocks, fired ball bearings from slingshots, and squirted acid from syringes at rows of riot police, who were heavily girded with body armor, helmets, shields and flame-retardant uniforms. Police said nine officers suffered injuries ranging from acid burns to punctured eardrums.

Police deployed two mobile water cannons on loan from Belgian police. After repeatedly dousing the crowd, riot police with clubs and locked-together shields pushed protesters back up a hill to the Anglican church that is the focal point for the annual march. They arrested four people and the rest gradually dispersed.

Leaders of the Orange Order, Northern Ireland's major Protestant fraternal group with

more than 50,000 members, said they would continue to call for supporters to rally at the confrontation point and to block roads across the British territory. They say they are determined to march down the Garvaghy Road back into Portadown on Sunday.

"We don't want to see violence, but the ordinary Protestant people now are so frustrated, so angry, because our views and rights have been ignored throughout this so-called peace process," said David Jones, chief spokesperson for the Orange Order in Portadown.

Politicians from the province's two major Catholic-supported parties and the biggest Protestant-supported party, the Ulster Unionists, called that position irresponsible.

"You cannot call people onto the roads and then be able to control events. We've learned that lesson year after year," said Reg Empey, an Ulster Unionist member of Northern Ireland's new Protestant-Catholic administration, the cornerstone of a 1998 peace accord.

"There is nothing at all that justifies shooting incidents or throwing bricks," said Paul Berry, a member of the hard-line Democratic Unionist Party. "But we must understand that there is great frustration within the Protestant unionist community over the rights that are being taken away from us."

Troubled march through Portadown

Officials in Northern Ireland are appealing for Protestant hard-liners to call off street protests that have caused rioting, fear and destruction across the region. The protests and attacks are to force British authorities to cancel the ban on a traditional Protestant parade through a Catholic neighborhood.

The Orange Order

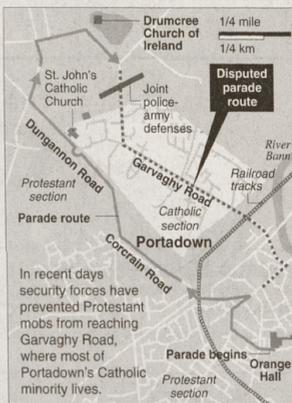
► Largest Protestant organization in Northern Ireland with about 80,000 active members.

► Formed in 1795 after a clash between Protestants and Catholics in the Battle of the Diamond near Portadown.

► The Orange Order stages more than 2,000 marches each summer to commemorate a variety of historical events. The annual Portadown march, every first or second Sunday in July, recalls Protestant losses in World War I. Its biggest mobilization, every July 12, celebrates the 1690 defeat of Catholic King James II by Protestant William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne.



Source: Compiled from AP wire reports



In recent days security forces have prevented Protestant mobs from reaching Garvaghy Road, where most of Portadown's Catholic minority lives.

Wm. J. Castello/AP



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News in Brief

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However, industry analysts predicted that Saudi Arabia, the world's No. 1 oil producer, would push ahead with its plan to boost output if oil prices fail to drop sharply in coming days.

The markets seemed to anticipate a production increase, with crude and other oil-related products declining.

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The 10 other OPEC members reacted with anger and disbelief after Saudi Arabia said Monday it would add about 2 percent to the cartel's official output of 25.4 million barrels a day.

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