

Sinn Fein leader tours United States

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Gerry Adams, the leader of Northern Ireland's Sinn Fein political movement, traveled to Washington, D.C. on Oct. 4 to take yet another dramatic step toward ending Britain's 80-year reign of terror against his homeland. High on his agenda was a first-ever official meeting at the U.S. State Department with senior officials of the Clinton administration, including senior White House staff.

The administration contact was made possible by a Clinton White House decision, conveyed to Adams by Vice President Al Gore, to lift the ban on official contact with Sinn Fein, a move that effectively removes the group from the government's list of terrorist organizations.

Adams's tour had already been endorsed by the Clinton White House, and Attorney General Janet Reno, for the second time, had issued a waiver of the visa restrictions against Sinn Fein, in order to allow Adams to enter the United States. Adams was also granted permission to tour the entire country, speaking before large, predominantly Irish-American audiences in cities from coast to coast.

Unlike his previous visit, which was explicitly suppressed by the British media, Adams's latest visit was widely reported on BBC, Reuters, and in all the major British press.

Since the earliest days of his presidency, Bill Clinton has placed the Northern Ireland situation near the top of his foreign policy agenda. On several occasions, Clinton hinted that he might appoint a special envoy to mediate the Northern Ireland-British conflict, much to the chagrin of British Prime Minister John Major.

At every stop on his tour, Adams expressed the deep gratitude of all the Irish people for Clinton's role in moving the peace process forward. At the same time, Adams minced no words about the continuing intransigence of the British government and the continuing violence by the British Army against the Irish republicans, even after the Irish Republican Army declared a unilateral cease-fire several months ago. Adams said that the IRA cease-fire has been maintained in the face of continued violent attacks by the British Army and by militant factions among the Protestant Unionists who favor continued affiliation with Great Britain.

Ireland's 'Mideast' peace process

In a live, televised address before a packed house of reporters at the National Press Club in Washington, Adams eloquently called for further progress on the path toward

peace in Northern Ireland: "I think it's worth remembering . . . what the Irish poet Seamus Heaney said. He said we have a space in which hope can grow. And I think that is the challenge facing all of us—you as well as me—to widen that space. And the delicate flower, the delicate seed which has been planted—hope can flourish. Hope can grow, and peace can be built out of the decades of conflict and violence."

Adams also told the Press Club audience that the successes in the Middle East peace process and in the transition to multi-racial rule in South Africa demonstrate that the Irish situation, too, can be resolved: "If it works in the Middle East, why not in Ireland? And on a day in which Nelson Mandela, the President of South Africa, returns to Washington, we have to say if it works in South Africa, why not in Ireland? . . . Had I come here two years ago and outlined how far we would have moved by now, people would have scoffed. Had I come here five years ago and talked about the developments in South Africa or the unity of Germany, or the demise of the Soviet Union, people would have scoffed. So there's no such thing as an intractable problem if there's good will and political will to change it."

In response to a question from the audience, Adams returned to the pivotal role of President Clinton and the United States. "Sinn Fein identified some years ago, the international dimension, the international community as being a decisive influence of moving the situation forward. And we identified the U.S. as one element in that. The European Union is another element," he said. "I think if one reflects that we have come to this point more speedily because of the positive engagement of the U.S. administration, so can peace be brought about without the U.S. involvement? I would think not. I would think it needs, when one is faced with the reality of such a long conflict, it needs someone from outside the frame to send encouraging signals. I think that a stalemate situation needs someone to come and point the way forward; I think that's what happened in South Africa. I think that's what happened in the Middle East. And it may not be necessary in Ireland. But if that facility is required, if peace in Ireland is dependent upon encouragement from the U.S., then that encouragement should be there when asked for."

Adams spelled out what Sinn Fein views as the three "core areas" of a negotiated settlement of the Irish issue: "There is, of course, the vast question of the constitutional and political future of the people of the island of Ireland. And we concede that that will take time, and that needs agreement. That needs the full participation of everyone in order to build a lasting and durable and permanent peace. The other core issues need less time. Demilitarization needs to commence and to be speeded up immediately. Issues of democratic rights need no discussion, either people have democratic rights or we don't. And if we don't, then they should be restored to us as speedily as possible."