



KEY SITE: Pakistan's Khyber Pass bordering Afghanistan

Money devoted to armed conflict would be better spent on the poor

THE year was 2004. I was in Pakistan as a foreign correspondent and just about to begin a trip along the Khyber Pass to the border with Afghanistan.

Foreigners were in serious danger of being kidnapped, usually for money and had to be accompanied by an armed escort. I ended up in a white Toyota Corolla behind an open, maroon-coloured vehicle containing three Pakistani Rangers dressed in black and carrying automatic weapons. Just another day in journalism.

Winston Churchill, who was there in 1897, wrote at the time: "Every rock, every hill, has its story." I was struck by the number of British army regimental plaques embedded in the stony hillside along the route. No doubt some of the many soldiers who perished in the region were natives of Ireland.

When my protectors and I got to the Afghan border, it was temporarily closed to the public to permit movement by US troops engaged in the "War on Terror". In due course, the all-clear was sounded and the place became a hive of activity. Truck after huge truck packed with food and other goods made its way through the checkpoint into Afghan territory. Hundreds of pedestrians were also crossing the border, in both directions. People coming from the Pakistani side looked poor enough but those entering from Afghanistan were literally dressed in rags. There were young children carrying heavy loads, sacks containing cans of oil (whether for heating or motor purposes was unclear) which could be sold at a profit on the Pakistani side. The kids were aged between six and 10 and their clothes and hair were smeared with oil and the dust of the road. Some of them actually laughed at this foreign visitor who stared at the scene in open-mouthed amazement. It was quite an eye-opener

Deaglán
DE BRÉADÚN



and, making my way back along the Khyber Pass, I no longer felt fear but rather pity and regret that so much money was being spent on armed conflict when it should be devoted to the poor and downtrodden.

I had expressed a similar view in 2001 with regard to the Irish situation, in the conclusion to a book of mine, where I wrote that: "The great unresolved issue, North and South, which has been obscured by the national conflict, is the poverty, deprivation and lack of social and economic opportunity experienced by large sections of the population, Catholic and Protestant."

In a second, updated edition of *The Far Side of Revenge: Making Peace in Northern Ireland*,

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published by The Collins Press in 2008, I wrote that, "Social and political deprivation and discrimination laid the groundwork for the Troubles", adding that the causes of poverty and equality needed to be addressed by republicans in cooperation with everyone else to ensure there was no recurrence of conflict.

In the same volume I noted that the question of a "Border Poll" (with the term in quotation marks) had been "receiving relatively little attention". Things have certainly changed in that regard in more recent years. Sinn Féin are pushing hard for a referendum on the border. The latest opinion poll by Ireland Thinks on southern politics, published in the *Irish Mail on Sunday*, has SF still in first place at 30 per cent with Fine Gael scoring 24 and Fianna Fáil on 15 points. In his accompanying article, John Drennan writes that this indicates Sinn Féin could expect to go up by 20 Dáil seats to 57 in the next general election. That would be 23 short of the minimum required for an overall majority and could lead to some interesting conversations with other parties and TDs.

Meanwhile, I note that former US president Bill Clinton celebrated his 75th birthday last Thursday. One hopes the day went well for him, whilst wondering at the same time if he would have prepared for and handled the Afghan situation in a better way than the current White House incumbent. The recent appalling chain of events doesn't reflect well on the current US administration which should, given its military and intelligence resources, have anticipated the Taliban takeover and taken appropriate steps to at least ensure unfettered access to the airport at Kabul as well as flights to safety for anyone whose life is in danger. You don't need to visit the Khyber Pass to realise that.

ON THIS DAY

AUGUST 25 1921

O'Duffy on Truce

THE following statement regarding the shooting of Constable Thomas Keane in Belfast is issued by Commandant Eoin O'Duffy, [Truce] liaison officer: "Since the beginning of the Truce our people in certain districts of the city have been attacked by mobs and in order to frustrate such attacks I found it necessary to send out patrols of two men from the local Intelligence Department of the IRA. ... Generally such patrols were unarmed but on some occasions, the patrols carried revolvers for their own protection. Volunteers Fox and Crumney were acting under my orders". ...

The death took place yesterday of Frederick Fox who was shot accidentally in Earlswood Road. Deceased was a prominent Gaelic player for the O'Donovan Rossa team.

Mr Eoin O'Duffy as Truce Liaison Officer, stated last night that on 11th July the manager of the Northern Bank, Maghera [County Derry], was held up by armed and masked men and a sum of £1,635 taken from him. On the same day the manager of the Ulster Bank was held up. Both managers immediately reported the matter to the local RIC without result. The matter was taken up by the local IRA who eventually succeeded in tracing the cash. Commandant O'Duffy, accompanied by the local IRA officer, has returned the amount in full to the respective managers.

'No Amnesty' – Lloyd George

IN THE House of Commons yesterday, Viscount Curzon [Conservative] asked the Prime Minister whether the same amnesty that had been granted to rebels and convicted murderers in Ireland will be granted to those police and military now in prison and awaiting trial on charges of murder.

Mr Lloyd George – No amnesty has been granted to any prisoner in Ireland and the second part of the question does not therefore arise. [The member] is in no doubt referring to the release for a definite purpose of persons in custody who are the elected representatives of Irish constituencies, but this cannot be held to afford any precedent for the release of other persons. The number released is small in proportion to the number of those held in custody in respect of similar offences...

LLOYD George's pragmatic decision to release certain convicted Republican prisoners in 1921 to enable them to attend the Dail to consider the British government's peace terms generated anger on the Tory right. In the North, Eoin O'Duffy's announcement of IRA 'police patrols' angered the unionists whose B Specials were suspended under the truce. It was not until November 1921 that the Northern Ireland government finally gained control of security from London, enabling them to mobilise 32,000 armed Specials.

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