



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

Dealing with the Past to Build a Just and Peaceful Future: Promise and Challenges of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland

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9:30 - 11:00 AM

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Good morning everyone. Thank you very much for coming to this important briefing on dealing constructively with Northern Ireland's conflict-laden past, and helping to build a lasting just and peaceful future. I am particularly grateful to our panelists, all of whom have traveled to be here today – from overseas, from New Jersey, and from a town in my home district, Northampton, MA. Most importantly, I would like to commend all of our panelists on their important work, and the crucial endeavors of the organizations they represent.

Between 1969 and 1999, thousands of people died in the conflict in Northern Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 put a formal end to the violence and contained important provisions on the disarmament and demobilization of armed groups, policing, human rights, the demilitarization of British security forces, and the status of prisoners. While security situation has greatly improved since the Agreement, and impressive progress has been made where previously there was little hope, signing a peace agreement does not automatically lead to the harmonious coexistence of war-torn communities. It does not always bring justice for all those who suffered or punishment for all the perpetrators of violence. It does not magically heal the survivors' and communities' deep psychological and physical wounds. The absence of war, however important, is just a first step on the long and difficult road towards achieving genuine peace and reconciliation. It is complicated by the divergent narratives of the warring sides, power imbalances, and the legacy of prejudice and mistrust. Yet, taking this road is essential, if we harbor hope for a long-lasting peace, built on the foundation of recognition of and accountability for the past, cross-community trust in the present, and a just vision of the future.

There are many volatile communities in the world that are currently looking to Northern Ireland as an example of overcoming a long-lasting bloody conflict. Each context is different, with its own history and struggles, yet there is so much we all can learn from the challenges and successes of the peace process in Northern Ireland, the least of which is that it happened and its implementation continues to move forward. This is why it is important to take a critical look at

what has been done well, what could have been done differently and better, and to evaluate efforts for moving forward.

Today's panelists work at the forefront of many crucial aspects of Northern Ireland's peace process, and I welcome their critical analysis of the progress toward peace that has been achieved in the sixteen years since the Good Friday Agreement was signed, an assessment of efforts to carry out transitional justice, and their views on gaps in victims' access to truth, justice, and support. Basically, what is the status of and the challenges facing peace and human rights in Northern Ireland today.