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Violence in Northern Ireland (UK)

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Why in News

Recently, **Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom (UK)** saw the worst violence in years. Parts of Northern Ireland are split along sectarian lines, **23 years after a peace deal largely ended Northern Ireland's troubles.**



Key Points

- **Historical Conflict:**

- **Geographically**, Northern Ireland is part of Ireland. **Politically**, it's part of the UK.
- Ireland, long dominated by the UK, broke free about 100 years ago after centuries of **colonisation** and an uneasy union. 26 of its 32 counties became an independent, Roman Catholic-majority country. **6 counties in the north, which have a Protestant majority, stayed British.**
- Northern Ireland's **Catholic minority experienced discrimination** in the **Protestant-run state.**
- In the **1960s, a Catholic civil rights movement demanded change**, but faced a harsh response from the government and police.
- The **British Army was deployed in 1969**, initially to keep the peace.
 - The situation deteriorated into a conflict between Irish republican militants who wanted to unite with the south, loyalist paramilitaries who sought to keep Northern Ireland British, and UK troops.
- During three decades of conflict, **more than 3,600 people, a majority of them civilians, were killed** in bombings and shootings. Most were in Northern Ireland, though the Irish Republican Army also set off bombs in London and other British cities.

- **Ending the Conflict:**

- By the **1990s**, after secret talks and with the help of diplomatic efforts by Ireland, Britain and the United States, the combatants reached a **peace deal.**
- The **1998 Good Friday accord** saw the paramilitaries lay down their arms and established a **Catholic-Protestant power-sharing government** for Northern Ireland.
- The question of Northern Ireland's ultimate status was deferred: **it would remain British as long as that was the majority's wish**, but a future referendum on reunification was not ruled out.
- While the peace has largely endured, small **Irish Republican Army splinter groups have mounted occasional attacks on security forces**, and there have been outbreaks of sectarian street violence.
- The power-sharing arrangement has had periods of success and failure and still the government is not trusted by both the sides.

- **Problem Child of Brexit:**

- Northern Ireland has been called the “**problem child**” of **Brexit**, the **UK’s divorce from the European Union (EU)**.
- As the **only part of the UK that has a border with an EU nation**, Ireland, it was the trickiest issue to resolve after Britain voted narrowly in 2016 to leave the 27-nation bloc.
- An open Irish border, over which people and goods flow freely, underpins the peace process, allowing people in Northern Ireland to feel at home in both Ireland and the UK.
- The **insistence of Britain’s government on a “hard Brexit”** that took the country out of the EU’s economic order meant the creation of new barriers and checks on trade.
- Both Britain and the EU agreed that the **border could not be in Ireland** because of the risk that would pose to the peace process. The alternative was to put it, metaphorically, in **the Irish Sea** between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.
- That arrangement has alarmed **British unionists, who say it weakens Northern Ireland’s place in the UK** and could bolster calls for Irish reunification.

- **Reason for Current Violence:**

- **Brexit and Corona:**

- Britain left the EU on **31st December** and the new trade arrangements quickly became an irritant to Northern Ireland unionists who want to stay in the UK.
- Early trade glitches, exacerbated by the **coronavirus pandemic**, led to some empty supermarket shelves, fueling alarm.
- There was anger that British Prime Minister long insisted there would be no new checks on trade as a result of Brexit, had downplayed the scale of the changes wrought by leaving the EU.

- **Identity Crisis:**

Some in Northern Ireland’s British **loyalist community feel as if their identity is under threat**. And many other loyalists believe that, de facto, **Northern Ireland has ceased to be as much a part of the UK** as it was.

Source: IE