



REUTERS

The Irish bomb victim who came back from the dead

By Gideon Long

DUBLIN, Feb 6 (Reuters) - At the age of 14, Derek Byrne was carried into a Dublin hospital, laid out on a mortuary slab and declared dead.

His jugular vein had been slashed by shrapnel from a car bomb outside the petrol station where he worked, his hip and thigh bone were broken, he had a fractured leg and his face was a mass of lacerations.

Doctors had searched for his pulse and found nothing.

Some time later, Byrne regained consciousness which, as he recalls, "gave the woman working in the morgue quite a fright".

He was rushed to the operating theatre and had 23 hours of surgery. Some 700 stitches were needed to sew the tattered ribbons of his flesh back together again.

Byrne is a survivor of the Dublin and Monaghan bombings of May 17, 1974 - the bloodiest single day in the brutal 30-year sectarian power struggle over Northern Ireland.

On that day, paramilitaries detonated three car bombs in central Dublin in the space of five minutes at the height of the evening rush hour. Twenty-six people, including a pregnant woman, were killed.

Hours later another bomb exploded in Monaghan, close to the border with Northern Ireland, killing seven.

No warnings were given for any of the bombs.

"I was filling a car with petrol when it went off," Byrne told Reuters. "The

man who owned the car was killed outright.

"The blast blew me off my feet. I can remember the priest giving me absolution at the scene and then my mind went blank. The next thing I knew I was in the morgue."

Byrne spent three months in hospital and has been back regularly for treatment, plastic surgery and counselling.

"I still have shards of metal buried in my chest," he said.

"The worst thing about it was the stigma," he recalls. "I'd turn up to discos aged 17 and be turned away at the door because of the scars on my face."

No one has ever been charged in connection with the bombings although the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), which was fighting to maintain British rule in Northern Ireland, has claimed responsibility.

But things are starting to change.

In December, a report commissioned by the Irish government suggested, but did not confirm, that the bombers may have been aided by British security forces.

The Irish government is expected to rule in March whether there should be a full public inquiry into the attacks, and a coroner's inquest will open in April.

Last month, survivors and relatives of those killed got their chance to tell a parliamentary sub-committee about the worst day of their lives.

The testimony shocked many, even on an island hardened by over 30 years of paramilitary violence which claimed the lives of more than 3,600 people.

One man described how a shard of steel sliced through the top of his head and stuck into the wall of the barber shop where he worked.

A woman recalled seeing another woman's spectacles implode into her eyes from the force of the blast.

Another described how she treated a girl at the scene.

"She had no clothes on the lower part of her body and the calf of one of her legs was just a bloody mass," she said. "She was calling for her mother and for

a drink of water. The image of that young girl is still very vivid in my mind."

No one believes that the recent reports, inquiries and hearings into the bombings will lead to convictions - those who carried out the atrocities may well be dead themselves.

But for Byrne and his fellow survivors, they may help draw a line under the attacks.

"A public inquiry would take a lot of pressure off people," he said. "I still get flashbacks when I walk down the street where I was given up for dead.

"I'll always have those terrible memories but maybe they can at least be eased a little."

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