

Protest Safety in Northern Ireland

Protests have rocked West Belfast in recent weeks, reportedly fuelled by tensions linked to post-Brexit trade barriers and a sense that Northern Ireland was being cut off from the rest of the United Kingdom. Loyalist communities were further angered when the Northern Irish prosecution service also announced it would not be taking action against members of the Sinn Fein party for breaching Covid-19 restrictions by attending the funeral of a prominent IRA figure, Bobby Store, last June.

[On April 8th, a cameraman for the Belfast Telegraph, Kevin Scott, was set upon by two men](#) while covering the protests. Sunday 18th marks the 2nd anniversary of the killing of Lyra Mckee, a journalist who was fatally shot in Derry during a riot.

Colin Pereira spoke to [Ken Perry](#), a security consultant who worked with an American television crew covering the violence. Ken has been a high risk media advisor for the last twelve years, covering conflicts in Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. As a local boy from Belfast, he has seen his fair share of protest there too.



CP: Ken, can you describe the nature of the protest violence you witnessed?

KP: Well we were mostly on the Loyalist side of the protests, but I think it is fair to say what we mostly saw was tit-or-tat violence from both communities. This consisted mainly of the throwing of stones, small missiles, fireworks and petrol bombs between the communities, but also at the police.

There were a few cars and a bus commandeered by the protestors, set alight and then pushed into the police lines. In fact we were warned by some locals that our van would be

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attractive so we parked it well away. It is sensible not to leave any valuables in the car as there is always a risk of petty criminals.

CP: How did you approach the protests and what's their mood towards the media?

KP: So we always would walk in, preferably from a neutral approach.

If you come in from the police side, there is a risk of being hit by missiles particularly by fireworks. Nearly 90 police officers have been injured in the last few weeks. If you approach from the demonstrator's side, there is a high chance that the protestors will confront you and potentially turn violent.

We were challenged several times. When they realised we were working for an American news network, the Loyalists informed us that they supported President Donald Trump and shouted accusations of "fake news" and other derogatory remarks. So it pays to be discrete in terms of newsrooms logos and branding.

I am also disappointed to say that there was a bit of racial abuse directed towards one of the crew members I was working with.

CP: The footage I have seen is that the protestors are mostly teenagers?

KP: They are mostly youths and mostly just bored and will deliberately just show off in front of the cameras.

However you should not underestimate them as they can quickly become violent.

They are paranoid about the presence of cameras and being filmed. They believe that the police will get hold of the footage and use it to identify and arrest them. Many had clearly been drinking or were under the influence of narcotics. So they can easily turn on the media and lots of them were carrying bats and sticks.

CP: Any other weapons? Obviously Lyra Mckee was shot two years ago at a protest?

KP: There were unconfirmed reports that weapons were on show in the Springfield Road on the Republican side. I did not see anything, but there is always potential for guns.

So it is sensible to have personal protective equipment. Stab vests, helmets and goggles as flying missiles are the major issue. I would not wear full ballistic vests, but that is a personal choice.

In terms of the police tactics to be aware of, they can use water cannons, but there is minimal risk of tear gas. So respirators are not required. In fact the police have been very restrained throughout this period.

CP: How do you see this playing out in the next weeks and months?

KP: Well there is supposed to be a lull because loyalist groups have been told to restrict their activities during the period of mourning for HRH Prince Phillip.

Initially it was expected that they would start up activities following the funeral, but I have just seen warnings on social media there will be a recommencement of protests almost immediately. Hotspots are likely to be Larne (where the port is), Carrick Fergus, Bangor and of course parts of Belfast. I have even seen calls for protests at the International airport in Antrim.

I anticipate this is just a warm up for the marching season. People have been incredibly frustrated with the lockdowns and protests are seen as a distraction. All against the backdrop of the ramifications of Brexit. So I am anticipating a busy few months.

For further insights, we recommend [the BBC Media Show](#) most recent episode also focuses on the threats to journalists in Northern Ireland. The show touches on the themes we have discussed with Ken, but also looks at the dangers of disinformation and the deteriorating media safety climate.

Colin Pereira, Director

In addition to his role at HP Risk Management, Colin serves as the Journalist Safety Strategist for the Committee to Protect Journalists.

HP Risk Management works with a number of newsrooms and journalist associations, providing on-call risk assessment support, safety advice and training. We continuously support journalists working in high risk and/or challenging environments. For more information please contact info@hpriskmanagement.com. You can reach Ken Perry on info@requisitesecurity.com.