The Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA) — a dissident splinter of the long-dormant Irish Republican Army (IRA) — claimed responsibility on Sunday for an attack against a British army base in Northern Ireland that occurred late Saturday night. As pizza was being delivered to the Massereene army base north of Belfast, gunmen opened fire, killing two soldiers and wounding four. It was the first time in more than a decade that British soldiers were killed in Northern Ireland.

In a flurry of responses, the leaders of the United Kingdom, Ireland, Northern Ireland and the IRA’s political wing, Sinn Fein, condemned the attack and said that it would not derail the now firmly entrenched peace process in the long-troubled country.

Northern Ireland comprises the six counties that opted to remain a part of the United Kingdom in 1922, after the rest of Ireland became a self-ruling state. The island has a centuries-long history of conflict between Protestants and Roman Catholics; however, once Ireland split from the United Kingdom, a bitter and often bloody ethno-political battle erupted between nationalist Catholics, who want Northern Ireland to reunite with the Irish Republic, and loyalist Protestants, who prefer to remain with the United Kingdom.

The modern phase of the battle, known as “The Troubles,” was fought from 1968 to 1998 by the militant nationalist IRA on one side and the pro-loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Defense Association paramilitaries, and eventually the British army and Northern Ireland police force, on the other. Since a peace agreement was struck in 1998, however, support for the nationalist and loyalist militant activities has decreased while support for the political process — including Sinn Fein — has increased. Those that rejected any peace deal left the IRA and created the hard-line RIRA — one of only four dissident Republican groups still active in Northern Ireland.

But this fragile peace agreement thus far has seen only times of prosperity for both the United Kingdom and Ireland. Now, amid the financial crisis, both countries are among some of the hardest-hit in Europe (especially Western Europe). Well before the economic crisis rooted itself on the British islands, Northern Ireland’s deepest-seated problem was its poor economy and grave poverty. Of the four economies in the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland’s is the smallest, and it traditionally has been an industrial economy. Heavy industry there has been declining for a while, and nothing has replaced it. What is left of heavy industry in Northern Ireland could be crushed under the weight of the financial crisis.

Though Scotland, Wales and England have unemployment numbers as high as Northern Ireland’s, those three countries have expressed their discontent in demonstrations against London’s inability to counter the crisis, while many in Northern Ireland tend to take their frustrations out in a more explosive manner. Threats and violence in the past six months have risen exponentially in Northern Ireland, according to police. This does not reflect the bulk of the population, which is committed to the tenuous peace agreement with London and Dublin. But the crisis has given those looking to break the
peace deal — like the RIRA — an opportunity and excuse.

It seems that London is also more than a little concerned that a new round of The Troubles could erupt. According to Chief of Police Services in Northern Ireland Sir Hugh Orde, London deployed elements of the British Army's Special Reconnaissance Regiment — the regiment at the forefront of intelligence and special operations in Afghanistan and Iraq — to Northern Ireland during the past week.

The political landscape in Northern Ireland has changed enough that a major breakdown in the country is not likely; however, the economic situation could be enough to rejuvenate the fight against London and plunge the country back into a security crisis. And the idea of such a crisis comes as the leadership of the United Kingdom is overwhelmed with problems: It is fighting two domestically unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and watching its banking sector crumble, and the United Kingdom’s population is counting the days until Prime Minister Gordon Brown steps aside. Violence across Europe prompted by economic troubles has already begun, and British officials expect a much larger backlash this summer, which has already been dubbed the “Summer of Rage.” In Northern Ireland, such violence is about more than reacting to the government, though it merges with the issue of keeping the United Kingdom intact.

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