

Kosovo Abandoned?

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Ethnic Albanian demands for independence and continued reprisals against organisations operating in Kosovo.

By Shkelzen Maliqi in Pristina (BCR No. 96, 26-Nov-99)

There are rumblings of discontent among officials of the international mission in Kosovo where complaints against the ethnic Albanian community are on the increase.

"They only complain and accuse the foreigners, without showing signs of respect for what we have done for them," one international official said recently. "If they continue this way, we will have to abandon Kosovo!"

Persistent demands for independence and revenge attacks on Serbs have provoked members of the international community - especially those unhappy with NATO's intervention in Kosovo - into expressing some antipathy towards Kosovo Albanians.

The West now faces a dilemma - having become involved in Kosovo to prevent the ethnic cleansing of Albanians by Serbs, they now run the risk of becoming implicated in the ethnic cleansing of Serbs by Albanians.

Critics of Western involvement pose the question: why get involved in

ethnic conflicts in the Balkans, where it is clear to everybody that almost all ethnic groups follow the same policy of the ethnic redefinition, flouting all the acceptable democratic standards?

No one is trying to play down the reality of Albanian vengeance.

Influential politicians and intellectuals in Kosovo acknowledge this problem. But the debate has not been helped by the alarmist reactions of some commentators.

Take, for example, Veton Surroi, owner and publisher of the Pristina daily Koha Ditore. Surroi rightly denounced attacks on elderly people, women and children as a clear violation of the traditional moral code of Albanian people. But he went on to argue that such attacks illustrated the beginnings of Albanian fascism and presented a real threat to the creation of a democratic society in Kosovo.

While foreign observers praised Surroi's courage in denouncing such revenge attacks, the political establishment in Kosovo reacted angrily to his outburst. Putting aside the extremist, personal threats that ensued, Surroi has never been denied the right to denounce revenge attacks.

But two of his statements are debatable. Surroi writes in his article that "here we are dealing with a most vicious, organised system of violence

against Serbs" and that "this system ... is called fascism". [The article was published in Koha Ditore as "Victims of the Victims".

See version published by IWPR as "Kosovo Fascism, Albanians' Shame," Veton Surroi, Balkan Crisis Report No. 69, August 25, 1999. See also "Hate Speech in Pristina," by Anthony Borden, Balkan Crisis Report No. 82, October 8, 1999.]

Surroi does not explicitly state who "stands behind this system of organised crime". But in Kosovo, there exists only two "organised" forces at whom such an accusation could be levelled: Ibrahim Rugova's Kosovo Democratic League (KDL), leader of peaceful resistance in Kosovo since 1990, and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), commanded by Hashim Thaci, leader of the interim government in Kosovo. To accuse Rugova, whose KDL movement has been on the defensive for quite some time, would be ridiculous.

Surroi can only be referring, therefore, to the KLA - lately transformed into the Kosovo Defense Corps, (KDC) - and the interim government of Thaci.

But there is precious little evidence to support the accusation. Thaci has publicly condemned the violence against Serbs and other minorities and has warned that some criminals may try to pass themselves off as members of the

KLA.

Rather than panic-monger about "organised crime" and "fascism", a more considered explanation for Albanian violence against Serbs needs to be understood. An explanation that takes into consideration spontaneous reactions by individuals and groups who endured traumatic experiences during the war and who are guided by feelings of hatred and revenge for the losses they have suffered.

Undoubtedly some individuals are trying to exploit the situation for criminal purposes, robbing and killing people from ethnic minorities. But it has to be remembered that during the war an estimated 110,000 houses were destroyed, mostly in rural areas, and that half the Kosovo population are currently homeless.

With winter rapidly approaching these people are desperate for shelter and, perhaps understandably, want Serbs they perceive as supporters of the Belgrade regime to leave.

Between the departure of the Serb forces and the arrival of KFOR troops, large swathes of Kosovo were without a single policeman. There was no vestige of law and order. A complete lack of organisation contributed to the levels of violence.

The key problem in Kosovo is not the prevalence of revenge attacks on minorities but the lack of a clear concept for the protectorate. The situation in Kosovo is unique. There is no model for the UN or the international community to follow. The military strategists and generals may well have a clear idea on issues of basic security, but the politicians have yet to reach any agreement on the political future for Kosovo.

Although independence looks to be the inevitable end result, the international community is still grappling with a justification for it. The implications for other potential crisis spots around the world are profound.

The UN and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) are intergovernmental organisations and require consensus before they can act. It will be very difficult to achieve a consensus on the independence of Kosovo. Long-term protectorate status would be unpopular with the indigenous population and extremely costly to implement.

Obviously, Kosovo Albanians will not accept an undefined status for purposes abstract and unreal to them, such as the handing back of Kosovo to a reformed and democratic Yugoslavia.

The international mission in Kosovo is confronting the fact that the

province presents a much bigger problem than originally envisaged. In fact, far from abandoning Kosovo, the international community is likely to be burdened with it for some time to come.

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