

Kosovo Crime Wave

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International officials in Kosovo seem powerless to stop a dramatic increase in crime.

Earlier this month, masked brigands swooped on a bus full of traders who had set out from Prizren in Kosovo to buy goods in Turkey. The robbers came away with a lucrative haul - about 200,000 German marks, gold, jewellery and other valuables.

Nothing unusual in that. Business is flourishing for bandits in Kosovo. Masked, armed men frequently burst into the homes of Kosovo Albanians and carry off their money under threat of death. Theft, brigandry and illegal possession of arms are sharply on the rise.

But there is one consolation. The murder rate has dropped steeply in the past 18 months since United Nations KFOR troops took over Kosovo at the end of the 1999 conflict with Serbia.

The annual reports of all five multinational KFOR zones as well as the UNMIK police, published at the beginning of this year, say that theft, blackmail and kidnapping have gone up by 70 per cent compared with last year.

But these statistics also register the drop in murders. Since July 1, 1999, when multinational forces arrived, 636 people were killed in Kosovo, of whom 288 were Albanians, 218 Serbs and 130 members of other minorities.

During 1999, on average, 20 people were murdered each week. The corresponding rate for 2000 was down by a factor of 10. The drop came as the war atmosphere faded and politically-motivated murders decreased.

Since the war ended about 1,200 people have been sentenced for crimes in Kosovo although this represented only 40 per cent of the crimes committed.

There are various explanations for the crime wave. Most people attribute it simply to Kosovo's widespread poverty. Few factories are working, unemployment is almost 80 per cent and no-one gets a pension. The average monthly salary of those who work is about 200 German marks, which can only buy bread, milk and sugar for a four-member family.

In Kosovo, a kilogram of bread costs a half a German mark, as much as in the West where average income is maybe ten times higher.

"Kosovo needs investment to kick start production," one local entrepreneur said. "This is being done slowly, since UN officials are still unclear about the privatisation of the economy. It is easier for them to do nothing."

One reason for the jump in crime is an influx of Albanian criminals deported from Western countries. Planes full of handcuffed Albanians frequently land unannounced in Kosovo and are set free at the airport.

Some of the deportees try to return to normal life, some seek to return illegally to the countries which kicked them out and some take up crime in Kosovo. Nobody knows how many of these criminals have returned here but their share in the criminal statistics is undoubtedly significant.

Criminals are helped by the fact that law and order in Kosovo is maintained by international policemen, now 4,000 strong, who have little knowledge of the local language, culture, terrain and the way the community functions.

The solution lies in higher numbers of professionally trained local police. At the moment, some 3,500 police cadets are training in the Vucitrn police school. Their number will rise to 7,000 this year. Once trained, Kosovo policemen will be given greater powers by the international police of UNMIK and will soon have their own secret services staffed by officers who know the surroundings and the people.

Until more policemen are trained, crime will continue to flourish. This was confirmed by the deputy head of the special police unit in Pristina, Dominik Pimm, who arrived here seven months ago from England. "Kosovo policemen are ready and willing to face the difficult situations and that's most important, but for them to become real policemen, they need to work at least two years with us," he said.

The widespread availability of weapons is a major factor. Even though the disbanded Kosovo Liberation Army, UCK, handed in most of its arms, the international military and police force confiscate weapons every day.

Kosovo Albanians armed themselves mainly during the so-called "democratic revolution" in Albania in 1997, when the Socialists of Fatos Nano ousted the authorities of Sali Berisha. On that occasion, over one million weapons were plundered from arms depots in Albania. Many of them reached Kosovo. International military forces and UNMIK have discovered and confiscated four large bunkers full of Albanian arms and ammunition.

The Serbian army and police, before and after their withdrawal from Kosovo at the end of the NATO intervention, provided arms for Serbs who stayed in Kosovo. Serbs in the northern part of Mitrovica, in the north of Kosovo, protest loudly at each confiscation of arms by KFOR.

Soldiers and international policemen have been injured and some units have even had to withdraw from the north of Kosovo.

Complete disarmament of Kosovo would seem to be virtually impossible, given the huge number of weapons held by Serb forces which remained in southern Serbia following the Kumanovo Military Agreement which ended the war in June 1998.

During the rule of ousted president Slobodan Milosevic, these weapons were sent into Kosovo by secret channels, together with instructors. KFOR has arrested some high-ranking Serbian policemen whose trial is now being prepared. Since the new authorities in Serbia assumed power, Albanian leaders say there has been no evidence of similar cases. They say they are watching the situation very closely.

At the same time, armed Albanians belonging to the "Liberation Army of Medvedja, Bujanovac and Presevo" are active in the border belt with Kosovo, in southern Serbia. Informed sources claim they are partly armed in Kosovo, and partly by buying black market weapons from the depots of the Serb army and police. There is talk that a "Kalashnikov" sells for 1,000 German marks.

Ordinary people can only place their hopes in the presence of the KFOR troops. Colonel Hankam,

commander of the Finnish battalion of KFOR in the municipalities of Liplan (Lipljan) and Shtime (Stimlje), told citizens, "Don't think KFOR is not in the streets, in the traffic, in the village, when you don't see their jeeps and armoured vehicles."

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