

Kosovo: Serb Return Blow

Author: [Erjon Kruja](#)

Just as the UN mission in Kosovo was sounding an optimistic note about refugee returns, violence reared its head.

The timing could not have been worse.

Hours after the head of the UN mission in Kosovo Michael Steiner, delivered an upbeat report to the Security Council in New York, a series of explosions ripped through several Serb houses in the northern village of Klokot.

Two US soldiers in the NATO-led peacekeeping force, KFOR, were wounded as they tried to investigate the blasts on July 31. A day earlier, their contingent had decided to stop wearing flak jackets after concluding that the security situation had improved.

It was a discouraging day for the UN mission which had just declared that violence was on the decline and pledged fresh efforts to bring Serbs back to their homes. Steiner condemned the attack and visited one of the owners of the bombed houses.

"If the perpetrators think they can impede (us), they are wrong," Steiner told reporters in Klokot. "We will double our efforts towards integration, returning of those who want to return and the creation of a respectful society."

Steiner said KFOR and the UN police were carrying out an investigation to reach "a final judgment" as to who was responsible for the incident.

Only days before, the UN chief announced a project worth 4.5 million euros to assist Serbs returning to the villages of Peje and Kline. According to the UN mission, the pilot project is designed to bring a few hundred Serbs back a month, paving the way for more numerous returns in the future.

Other similar projects have failed over the past three years and last week's bombings are yet another setback for the effort.

Some 150,000 Serbs and other minorities fled Kosovo following the NATO bombing campaign that forced the withdrawal of Serbian troops from the region. Albanian reprisals against the Serb minority were widely blamed for fuelling the exodus and sporadic violence has discouraged them from coming back. About 100,000 Serbs remain in Kosovo in enclaves guarded by KFOR troops round-the-clock.

Before the violence in Klokot, the UN mission hoped that a combination of international aid, political pressure and a safer security climate could produce a breakthrough in the return of Serbs and other minorities.

With the approach of local elections in October and the international scrutiny that accompanies it, ethnic Albanian political parties have struck an unusually tolerant tone in their public statements about displaced Serbs coming back to towns and villages in the region.

Although the number of returnees remains miniscule, western governments have sent a clear signal to the Albanians' independence-minded leadership that Kosovo has to prove its commitment to protecting the rights of minorities if it wants a resolution of its final status.

The chairman of the Democratic Party of Kosovo and former commander of the Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA, Hashim Thaci, is not known for advancing reconciliation. But at a recent party congress, Thaci said, "The return of refugees does not endanger Kosovo. On the contrary, it stabilises it, democratises it and opens immediate prospects for Kosovo's independence."

Kosovo's prime minister Bajram Rexhepi has also spoken of the return of minorities as one of the government's priorities.

For ethnic Serb leaders, however, the violence in Klokot provided yet more proof that the international community had failed to create a safe environment for Serbs hoping to go back to their homes.

Father Sava Janjic, in a recent commentary for IWPR, said that the explosions were merely the latest example of an organised campaign by KLA veterans and other groups to intimidate Serbs and prevent them from returning.

"Will the international community continue its practise of ignoring problems and tolerating Albanian extremist elements?" Father Sava wrote.

Even before the incident in Klokot, other Serb representatives in Kosovo criticised the UN mission's refugee return plan as utterly inadequate. They said it would take 100 years for all the displaced Serbs to come back, at the rate envisaged by the UN.

Serb leaders in Kosovo have called for a "mass return" of the exiles, something that international officials fear could spark off major turmoil. Instead, the UN mission in Kosovo says there should be a step-by-step approach to the process, allowing individuals to choose when it is right for them to move back.

The Serbian government in Belgrade, sceptical of refugee return projects, has proposed to divide Kosovo into ethnic entities, with a Serb district in the north of the province. But Steiner and other international officials, as well as ethnic Albanian leaders, have vehemently rejected the idea.

UN spokeswoman Susan Manuel said the agency has registered some 3,000 displaced Serbs interested in coming back this year. That does not mean those signed up will definitely make the move. In June, UNMIK had hoped thousands would return but most changed their minds.

After the explosions in Klokot last week, more Serbs may also decide against a homecoming.

Erjon Kruja is a freelance journalist in Pristina.

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